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Twinkle, Twinkle, Microwaves

THE BIG FANS
by KEITH ROBERTS

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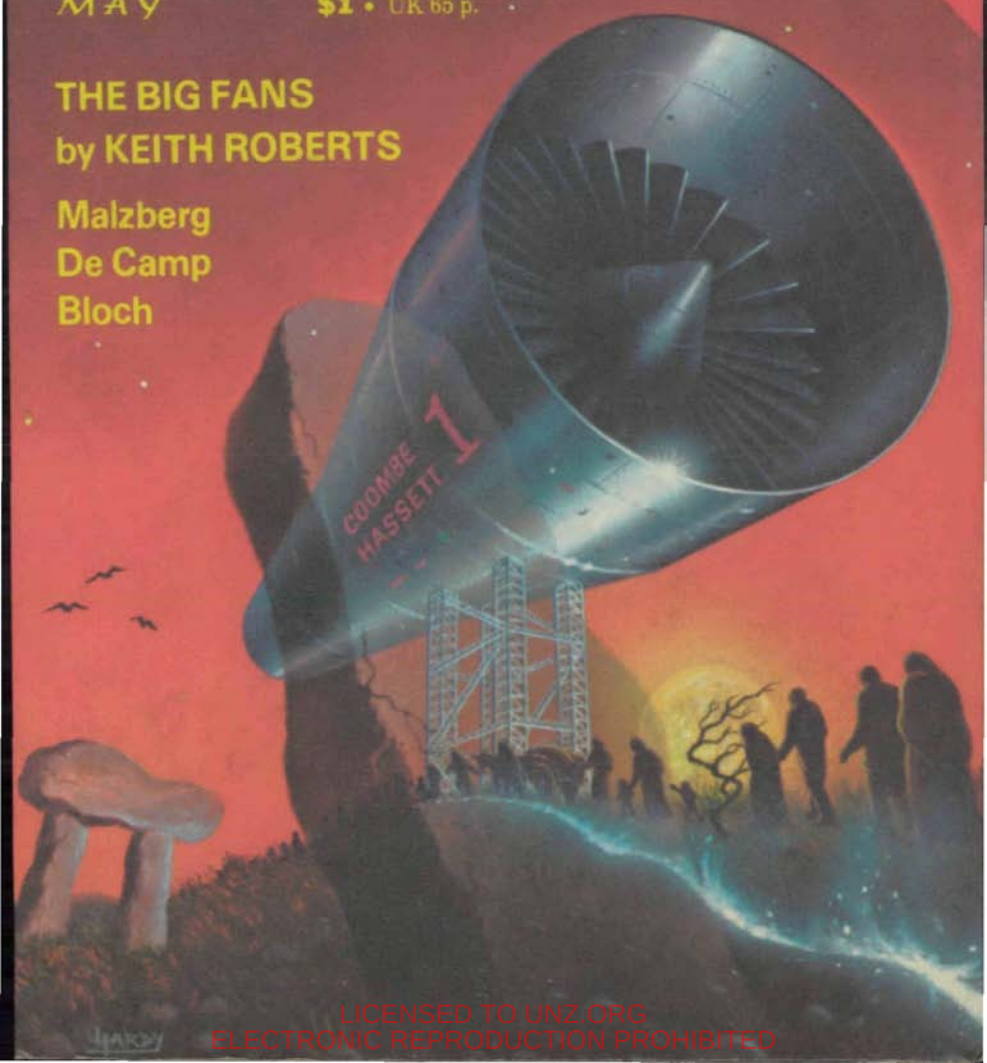

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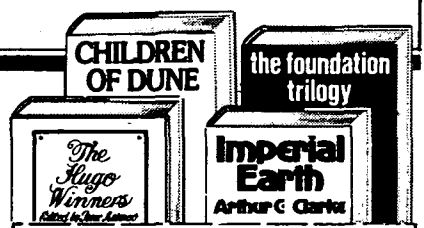

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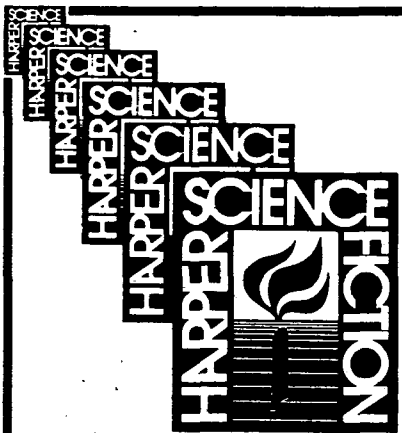

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Keith Roberts is one of the best of the many British writers of sf, has been publishing for about a dozen years. His work includes several novels (THE INNER WHEEL, THE CHALK GIANTS and PAVANE) and many short stories, including the series about Anita the witch ("The Mayday," November 1970; "Junior Partner," December 1970).

The Big Fans

by KEITH ROBERTS

I hadn't seen my old friend Alec Boulter for some years, though we had kept in touch by the usual amiable conventions, Christmas cards and the like. I was accordingly surprised to receive an invitation from him, couched in what were for Boulter terms of some urgency, to go down to Dorset the following weekend and spend a few days in the village of Coombe Hasset.

I was living, or existing, in West London at the time, eking out a perilous income as a writer with what part-time work I could find. My first impulse, looking down the usual list of deadlines, was to refuse; but the Portobello isn't the ideal area for an August heat wave, and I could work as well, or as badly, in Dorset as anywhere else. So I wrote an acceptance, and a couple of days later packed a suitcase and typewriter into the Midget I owned and got on the road.

The Midget had seen better days and was no longer the car for sustained high-speed running; and having anyway an ingrained dislike of motorways, I left the M4 as soon as was decently possible and began a process of cross-country dawdling, heading more or less toward my objective but in no particular hurry. I stopped for beer and a Ploughman's at a pleasantish pub in Wiltshire and finally entered Dorset a few miles above Shaftesbury. I pulled in to check the map and set off again, now with persistent visions of, among other things, tall, frosted glasses of lager. Though that was rapidly to be driven from my mind.

I suppose, on account of what finally happened there, Coombe Hasset is a byword to most English-speaking people. It wasn't quite so notorious then, though it was by no means unknown. That was for two main reasons. The first

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was Professor Sammy Farnham — or, to be more exact, the hill figure he had found, or claimed to have found, there. "Farnham's Folly," the popular press had dubbed it, and numerous representations had been made concerning it in places both high and low. The local vicar had led the attack, pushed on, I suspected, by his churchwardens, while the uninhibited nature of Sammy's discovery had even elicited a Question in the House. Sammy, equally noted for lack of inhibition, had retorted heatedly that such affronts to popular morality already existed, one not far from Coombe itself, and that the opponents of free expression might more profitably occupy themselves with beams than motes. I followed the row with some interest, as I'd been fortunate enough to meet Sammy, through Boulter's good offices, some years before. I remembered him chiefly for a fund of good stories and a seemingly inexhaustible capacity for well-racked ale.

Coombe Hasset's second claim to fame was more recent. The area had been selected as the site for a radically new experiment in the generation of electricity by wind power. Five turbines had been built in all, in a straggling line across the high chalk downs in which the village lay; and again the arguments had waxed hot. Though I, for one, couldn't see that the conservationists, who had put up the shrillest wail, had much of a case. Anything seemed better than the mushroomlike proliferation of reactors with which we had previously been threatened, while the new units, it was claimed, would be noiseless, noncontaminating and virtually foolproof.

The conservationists might have made the biggest noise; but that wasn't the direction from which the real trouble was to come, at least if the media were to be believed. All the major unions, from the miners and power workers to the dockers, were up in arms; all foresaw redundancies on a massive scale if the new system caught on, pit after pit closing down, power station after power station going off line as the country drank its fill from a host of silver windmills. And, as ever, the hour had brought the man: one Jimmy Hebden, ex-coal-face-worker, now the self-appointed Leader of the People. In under six months he had succeeded in making himself certainly the most hated and probably the most feared figure in the country. His tactics were victimization and coercion, his methods the bludgeon and the boot. To which he added, unfortunately, an alarming organizational skill and an unerring grasp of the weaker points of Western democracy. There had been protest

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marches in London and elsewhere, in all of which Hebden's bands of bully boys had figured prominently. A massive, violent affair the week before had resulted in two deaths, while it was claimed plans were afoot to disrupt the official opening of the new system, scheduled for early September. There had been wild talk on both sides, ending in a threat by the government to garrison the entire area with troops. After that, things had fallen quiet, though there was a general feeling that the fires were banked rather than extinguished.

It was with thoughts like these that I rounded the last bend of the road and saw Coombe Hasset ahead of me, the grey stone houses and the grey stone church nestling in a fold of downs. To my left the land climbed steeply, becoming a bulging, grassy hill; I glanced up, and instinctively pulled the car onto the low, wide verge. I killed the engine and got out, staring; and I think it was then the curious excitement that pervaded the place first gripped me, so that the emotion I felt all but brought in its wake the sting of tears.

Above me, high above and jutting at the intense sky, was what looked like nothing so much as a gigantic silver funnel. I made out the circular track on which it would rotate, swiveling to face the wind, and round it, like trumpets pointed at the four quarters of the sky, the secondary assemblies that would power the main structure from their own independent generators. On the face of the hill, mazes of darker lines showed where power cables had been laid; below, set into the turf, were the plain white rectangles of the bunkers that housed the control gear and that would in time house the on-watch engineers.

I knew a great deal about that structure; the press coverage had after all been comprehensive enough. I knew that what I was looking at, basically, was a simple Convergent Duct. I knew that if placed mouth downward beside the tower of Coombe Church it would all but triple its height; I knew that on the stillest day below, the flow speed from the venturis seldom dropped below fifty knots; I knew the power from the turbines in that vast dural throat would light a score of villages like the one that nestled beneath it. But none of it, it seemed, had prepared me for the actuality of Coombe Hasset One and its mighty sisters. All I could do was stand there like a fool, my hands on the car's hot paintwork, and stare up at the giant while a line from Shakespeare went senselessly through my head, a line about the winds, the sightless couriers of the air.

I suppose I should have

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remembered the words that come after it. But I didn't.

I pulled myself away finally, got in the car and drove on. I'd all but forgotten the existence of Farnham's Folly. It hadn't been visible from the road; I supposed, in a vague way, it lay on the side of the hill that faced the village. I remembered at least some complaints about its being in sight from the church nave during services. But for the moment I couldn't work up much enthusiasm; the new Presence on the hill had all but eclipsed Sammy's jaunty discovery. I remembered, with a little upwelling of pleasure, my long-overdue meeting with Boulter. I slowed as I entered the village street, wondering how best to find his place.

The address he had given was brief, merely "Ley House, Coombe Hasset." That didn't convey much to me; it didn't convey much to the elderly woman in the sweetshop and tobacconist's at which I stopped, either. An anxious conversation with an unseen party in the back room finally elicited the information that it must be "that gurt place up atop," and I was given more or less detailed directions.

Coombe itself was much as I remembered it: The church; three or four solid, comfortable-looking pubs; a village pump long-disused; an "Olde Englysshe Tea Shoppe" with coaches drawn up outside. I turned left by the church and left again, passed a little row of superb timbered cottages — pre-Elizabethan, if the frame spacing was anything to go by — and nosed the car into a climbing, stony track. I had been warned by my informant I wouldn't be able to take "that sporty little thing" all the way. I drove carefully, mindful of the advice, and was soon rewarded by bumps and clunks from beneath. A grassy, tire-marked patch to one side of the lane seemed the best solution. I eased the Midget onto the soft standing and got out.

It was then I experienced the second of those curious shocks, a thrill of excitement, almost of pleasure, for which I was wholly unable to account. Concentrating on keeping my sump intact, I had been unable to pay much attention to what lay ahead. I saw now that the lane sloped up to a field gate. On the right stood a copse of tallish trees, summer-green and rustling; beyond the gate, on the swell of land crowned by the great silver funnel, sprawled Sammy's massive Folly. Markers showed where the excavation was still not wholly complete. Closer at hand, the lane became a bridge over a chuckling brook, and I saw what was evidently the disused race of an old mill. The mill house remained,

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though partly roofless; and an outbuilding was being used to store bright-blue sacks of fertilizer.

The race was protected on the lane side by a handrail of white-painted wood. I walked forward, leaned my elbows on it. To my right the stream, swinging beneath the path, had scooped out a wide, shallow scour. In it brooklime grew in masses, its leaves like glossy dark-green pennies. Beyond, in the marshy ground, stood great drifts of an elegant lilac-flowered plant I couldn't identify. The sun flashed and sparkled from the fast-moving water; at my feet the great stone slot of the race, some ten or twelve feet deep, was clothed with moss, hung with the luminous, wobbling leaves of hart's tongue ferns. The stream rumbled, pouring from the lip in a steady brown-green curve; from it breathed the first cool air I had felt all day.

I must have stood the best part of an hour, drinking in not the calm of the place but a strange, almost vibrant excitement, a feeling wholly inexplicable, born it seemed of the sun sparkle through the shifting leaves, the sailing of the white cloud masses above the little glade. Once I remembered I took out a pack of cigarettes, put it away unopened. It seemed a rare, almost a magic time, something to savor, the sort of thing, in fact, I thought I had long since put behind me.

I came round eventually feeling every sort of fool. I realized I hadn't as yet found Boulter's apparently mysterious domicile. Beyond the bridge a rutted track wound up to the left, curved from sight beneath overhanging trees. I followed it; twenty paces, and I was looking at the house.

Part of the mystery at least was explained, for the place had evidently recently been remodeled and renamed. In part it was old, old as the mill itself; a square-built stone cottage, roses climbing beside a trellised porch. Beyond, a bungalow wing had been added, in a sensible, nonassertive style. A veranda fronted it; from it, a twenty foot opening seemed to lead directly into the house itself. I guessed at a glass wall, power-operated, and remember feeling faintly surprised. I knew Boulter, tired of the electronics ratrace, had taken up a lectureship at a reasonably influential university; but somewhere along the line he'd evidently done much better than I had realized.

I opened the gate, walked up across a sloping lawn toward the house. As I did so, some flicker of movement caught my eye, and I saw the veranda was not in fact empty. A woman sat there, in the comparative shadow, seeming to watch me intently. I saw a pale oval face, a dark sweep of hair that she

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brushed back with a peculiarly deliberate gesture; and though it was doubtless unworthy, I remember feeling a little pang of disappointment. I hadn't heard that Boulter had got himself involved in that particular direction, though I don't suppose there was any real reason why I should; but in my experience women can get curiously possessive about their menfolk when friends of long standing turn up suddenly out of the blue. I'd been expecting, if not a riotous weekend, at least a jar or so of ale and a good chewing-over of old times. Now it seemed that was not to be. I glanced up again, as I reached the house, and received a third faint but definite shock; for the chair in which she had sat was empty.

What seemed to be the front door was in the older cottage. I jangled at the bell and was rewarded, after the briefest of intervals, with Boulter.

I suppose I looked my surprise. I hadn't expected his hair to have greyed. Grey it was, though, and streaked with silver at the temples. But, as of old, it was faintly overlong, and the grin was very much the Boulter I had known. He said, "You've put a bit of weight on yourself, Glyn. Come on in, glad to see you."

I walked through behind him into the big room I had seen, the room that opened onto the veranda. It was wide and low, touched now with patches of leveling sunlight. It ran, I saw, the full width of the older house; on the far side, picture windows gave onto the down, the looming presence of the turbine. A big TV stood in one corner, its screen swiveled to the wall; there were shelves of books, a purposeful-looking hi-fi, massive, overstuffed easy chairs. Boulter waved a hand at the nearest. He said, "Make yourself at home."

I sat. Beyond the veranda, rearing over the intervening trees, was the tower of the village church. At my back Coombe Hasset One, waiting on its hill. Church, house and machine all exactly in line; and again that peculiar buzz, that near-thrill.

Boulter was watching me keenly. When I looked up, he grinned again. He said, "Beer, or something stronger? There's some lager in the frige."

I said, "You're a thought reader."

He left to fetch the first aid, looking very countrified and relaxed in open-necked shirt, sandals and slacks. I looked round again. No sign of another occupant in the big, exquisite room. I was wondering where the woman had gone. Or if — such was my curious state of mind — I'd really seen her at all.

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Boulter came back with a tray on which stood glasses and two bottles, frosted as ordered. He uncapped one, passed it across. He said, "There's a table by your elbow. Have any trouble finding the place?"

I was struggling with something, some question, that seemed almost on the tip of my tongue. I said, "Not really. I asked in the village. They weren't too sure at first."

He said, "If you'd said Mill Farm Cottage, they'd have been all right. They're nothing if not conservative down here." He caught my eye wandering and shook his head. He said, "It isn't my place. You don't do this sort of thing on a lecturer's pay. Belongs to a pal of mine, lucky blighter, works for the U.N. He's just off on a three-month tour, family included. I kindly agreed to look after it while he was away."

I decided whatever the question was, it would have to wait. As I've said before, Boulter never does anything without a reason. There was a purpose behind the seemingly urgent invitation; he would get round to it, but in his own good time. I took out the cigarettes, lit up. I said, "Who's the girl?"

He looked vaguely amused. He said, "Oh, that's Sarah. I'll tell you about her later."

I said, "Is there much to tell?"

He raised his eyebrows. He said, "Not much, no." Then again he seemed to read my thoughts. He said, "You needn't worry about her, Glyn. She's all right."

I had my own ideas about that. I decided to keep them to myself. The lager was good; I drank and refilled the glass. Boulter said, "Where'd you leave your car?"

I said, "By the bridge." And instantly, at the memory of the place, came that little thrill of ... what? Excitement is the only word I can find. Formless, but powerful. Again, Boulter saw and seemingly understood. Something nearly like satisfaction showed for a moment in his eyes. I said, "They warned me in the tobacconists I wouldn't drive all the way up."

He said absently, "There's a knack to it, you have to know the marks to aim at. We'll fetch it up later." He drained his lager, set the glass down. He said, "Sarah, meet Glyn Thomas. Very old friend of mine. Glyn, Sarah Trevelyan."

She had entered silently, barefooted. I rose and experienced yet another of those faint shocks in which the place seemed to specialize. The face I had seen, in the shadows of the veranda, had seemed mature, a woman in her early thirties, at very least. But this girl was young, no more than nineteen or twenty. She was small too, neat and vividly pretty:

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straight dark hair, a lot of it, and those wide-spaced, deep-blue eyes you see so seldom, that speak of the true Celt. She was dressed casually enough, in jeans and a sleeveless, round-necked jumper; but there was about her a stillness, a quality of calm assurance, that somehow just didn't sit with her years. I felt instinctively this was a girl who, sitting silent in a crowded room, could yet command the attention, the awareness, of all. The hand she offered was cool, and firm; she smiled slowly but didn't speak. Instead, she crossed to where I had first seen her, sat head back to watch out once more at the village, the church tower, the still, golden trees that clothed the slope below the house. Boulter watched her for a moment, gravely. Then he said, "Eaten, Glyn?"

I indicated that I was fine, but he shook his head. He said, "We're kind of knee-keep in local produce right now. Dick — that's the guy who owns the house — laid out a small fortune on a kitchen garden earlier on. Now he's mad because he's missing the season. Can you fix us something, Sarah?"

She nodded and said, "Will do." She uncoiled herself and left as silently as she had arrived.

What she fixed were dishes of strawberries, plentifully heaped with cream, and a platter of crispy wholewheat bread. While we ate, Boulter nodded at the high slope of down. He said, "What do you think of the Silver Monster?"

I said, "Is that what they're calling it?"

He nodded. He said, "Among other things."

I hesitated. Difficult to explain what I had felt about Coombe Hasset One. In one way, it would have needed a book. I certainly wasn't going to admit that an outsize tin funnel had damned near got me piping my eye. I said, "I think the alternatives are a hell of a sight worse."

Boulter put his plate down. He said, "You can say that again. Do you realize, Glyn, the plutonium derivative they're using on the new reactors is so toxic that a lump the size of a tennis ball would release enough cell-seeking material to give leukemia to the entire population of the world? And they're moving it in ten-ton truckloads."

I hadn't realized. And there didn't seem much to add. Instead, I said, "You've been down here a time, Alec. Do you think there's going to be trouble?"

He said, "About the jennies? Our masters do, and that's a fact."

I said, "I did hear talk about bringing the army in."

He said, "I'll let you into a trade secret. The army's here already."

I looked my surprise, and he

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nodded. He said, "It's strictly a low-profile operation so far. But they mean business. They took over a couple of old quarries on the other side of the village; most of the hardware's in there. Command post's in Coombe Hasset itself, there's a truck in back of the post office. 'Nother lot up on the down there, in Giant Copse."

I said, "Hardware?"

He nodded. "APC's for the most part, couple of Saladins. Some lighter stuff."

I whistled and he said, "Yes. Makes you think on a bit, doesn't it?"

He stood up. He said, "We'd better fetch your things up. I'll come down with you. Sarah's made a bed up for you. Where are we putting him, love?"

She said, "The top bedroom." She turned, addressing me directly for the first time. She said, "It's only small. But I hope you'll be comfortable."

I said, "I'm sure I shall," and she laid a hand on my arm. She said gravely, "I'm glad you could come. Alec talks a lot about you. It meant a lot to him."

As we walked down across the lawn, Boulter turned to me. He said, "As I told you. She's all right."

The sun had gone from the little bridge; the deep race was in shadow. Its breath still came up to me, old and chill and sweet. Boulter paused by the handrail. He said, "It was an undershot wheel of course. You can see where the shaft bearings used to be. The stones were in the first building, on the end there. There's still an old cracked one round the back. We were going to lug it up the hill. Couldn't quite think what to do with it when we got it there though."

I said, "What are the tall plants on the other side? With the lilac flowers?"

He said, "Giant balsam. They're a plague round here. Got an explosive seed dispersal system, I'll show you later on. Gives you a right turn the first time."

I said, "Alec," and he turned, again with a glint of amusement. He said, "What?"

I said, "Nothing. It'll keep. Let's get the car up."

Boulter's system for low-slung vehicles proved complex but workable. We pointed the hood at the first post of the handrail, locked sharp right, realigned and locked again. A couple of admonitory thumps, and the Midget was across. Boulter directed me round to the side of the house. There were a pair of garages, both with their doors standing open. Outside the nearer stood a smart olive-green Range Rover. I parked, hefted my gear,

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walked back with Alec to the house. He said, "I'll show you your room. Then I thought you might like to walk down to The Grapes. Landlord's a pal of mine. And the regulars are a decent crowd."

I said, "Fine by me. What about Sarah?"

He said, "She won't come. She's getting dinner on. I've got some wine to pick up anyway." He opened a door. He said, "Here you are. Loo's at the end there, straight ahead. Bathroom next door. Take your time."

The bedroom to which he had shown me was small, as the girl had said, tucked up under the eaves of the old cottage. A little bowl of roses stood on the dressing table, and the door of the tall, old-fashioned wardrobe had been left ajar. I unpacked, desultorily. I hadn't brought a sight down with me. The bed was made up, the top sheet turned down crisp and flat. There is such a thing, definitely, as a woman's touch.

I sat down and rubbed my face. I experienced a most extraordinary moment of pure melancholy; again, the sort of thing I thought I'd left years behind. I'd never managed to find my Ideal Woman, not that I blamed the opposition overmuch; and I'd made a pact with myself nobody else knew about, that I wouldn't waste any more time looking. My life wasn't bad, as lives go; but there was something about Coombe Hasset, something in the very air, that reminded me of its brevity. All sensations here seemed subtly heightened; this was the flip side of the coin.

I washed, shaved, changed my shirt and shoved a fiver in the back pocket of my slacks. I walked back downstairs. Sarah was scurrying about the kitchen, laying out this and that. She grinned at me, and Boulter opened the side door. He said, "Eight o'clock, love," and she said without malice, "Ha ha."

The Grapes proved to be a biggish, comfortable pub on the outskirts of the village. The lounge windows commanded a view of the high down; and, inevitably, the great funnel of the turbine, glinting golden now in the evening light. The landlord, a neat, dark, alert man who looked, and subsequently turned out to be, ex-RAF, greeted Boulter cheerfully. We talked the usual pleasant stuff, over mugs of first-rate bitter: the state of the local crops, the chances of the village cricket squad in a forthcoming needle match, the merits and otherwise of barrel pressure in the conditioning of beer. Later I was introduced to a craggy, horn-rimmed character who Boulter explained was one of the engineers from the Coombe project. He seemed well pleased with the state

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of his world and announced that "Five had been hooked in" that afternoon. I asked a question, and he shook his head. He said, "They number outwards both ways from Big Nellie up there, she's the center of the chain. Five's just this side of Warrenfield, about three miles down the road. Two and Four are up north. Which way did you come in, Shaftesbury?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "You could've seen Four from the road then. Two's behind some trees, in a bit of a dip."

I said, "I didn't see anything till this one hit me between the eyes."

He grinned, staring up. He said, "Big bastard, isn't she? There's bigger in the pipeline though."

I said, "If Hebden doesn't get his way."

He said, "Christ, don't talk about that sod. We've got troubles enough of our own. You should hear what they call him on site." He drained his glass, set it down with a thump. He said, "Tip up, Alex, it's your ruddy round."

Boulter said, "You sorted that drive shaft problem, Mike?"

He nodded. He said, "Changed the whole unit. Another few thousand of the taxpayers' money." He turned to me. He said, "This you won't believe. But to burrow out for the jennies and control gear, get it all down out of sight, costs six times more than the ducting up on top."

I said, "Because of the environment people?"

He narrowed his eyes. He said, "Ostensibly, yes."

I waited, and he shrugged. He said, "Out of sight, out of mind. The deeper they are, the safer. No little picking fingers. But the cooling problems were hell."

It seemed pointless to pursue the question; he'd said all he intended to already. Instead I said, "One thing I never really understood, though. If this system gets going, ducts on all the high ground from here to Argyll, what about voltage drop through the lines? It was always the big objection."

He grinned again. He said, "Alec could have told you that. Know anything about superconductors?"

I said, "Only that they work."

He said, "You know as much as anybody then. But look. If we drop the conductors to two degrees Kelvin, that's about two hundred and seventy below, close enough to absolute zero to make no odds, we can send thirty kilovolts to John o' Groats if we want. And get thirty kv back. End of problem."

I said, "That's fine as far as it goes. But where does the power come from for the refrigeration?"

He pointed solemnly at the

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ceiling. He said, "Off the big fans."

I said, "You reckon you can generate that much? And still have a usable margin?"

He nodded. He said, "Such are the articles of our faith."

He excused himself a few minutes later and left. After he had gone Boulter said, "It is a faith, you know. With all of them."

I said, "He certainly sounded serious enough."

Boulter said, "He's a conservationist. A lot of them are."

I said, "He hardly looked the type."

Boulter said with unaccustomed gravity, "The *type* is the human type, Glyn. It's getting that serious."

We weren't, as it turned out, all that late back. The church clock struck eight fifteen as Boulter pushed open the kitchen door. The table had been set, and the meal, a delicious-smelling *coq au vin*, was ready. Boulter busied himself with the chilled wine we had brought back, while Sarah served. He said, "In the best spirit of the investigators of old, the intrepid band ate a hearty supper."

The meal tasted as good as it had smelled. We were all too busy to talk much for a time. It was succeeded by an extensive cheeseboard, presided over by what Boulter described as the last piece of Dorset Blue in the universe. Later I said, "Apart from being a superb chef, Sarah, what do you do for a living?"

She smiled. She said slowly, "Nothing much. I'm a secretary."

Boulter poured the last of the wine. He said, "She's also the meanest hand in the business with a Tarot pack. That's why she's here."

I laughed and received one of Alec's direct, expressionless stares. I knew that look as well; I'd come unstuck too often in the past by not taking him literally. I waited, wondering if the wine might have loosened his tongue; but the hope was forlorn. Nothing loosen's Boulter's tongue, until he's good and ready.

We carried coffee and brandies through to the lounge, sat awhile in silence just watching out. I don't know how to adequately describe the atmosphere of that great room as dusk deepened. Lights were showing now, here and there among the huddled houses of the village; about them the church tower loomed massive against a turquoise afterglow. The roar of the little race came up clear, wafting with the cool air from the valley; and by the house grew more drifts of the great balsam plant. As the blue deepened, so the massed flower heads seemed almost to glow with a chalky luminescence. A car

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revved, sounding a long way off; and I was aware of something that, insistently as I put it from me, as insistently returned. A presence, almost a power, that flowed on and on down the dark valley, out into the night, endless, inscrutable, immeasurably *old*.

It was Boulter who broke the spell. A few minutes before ten the girl stirred suddenly, reached to pick up a cardigan; and Alec leaned to press a control switch on the wall. A soft hissing and the great glass screen rose, shutting off the night. He moved round the room, clicking on alcove lights here and there. He said, "I think we'd best have a look at the ten o'clock."

I thought the newscaster looked abnormally grim. The lead story he had was grimmer. There had been another demonstration, this time in Parliament Square. We saw Hebden first, the so-called Spokesman for the People, the angry, intolerant face, skin drawn taut across the cheekbones, eyes that flashed and snapped behind the heavy-framed glasses; we heard the thick, grating voice as he harangued the crowd. The cameras moved then to the demonstration itself. We saw the fighting break out, fists swinging and bottles, a man stamped bloody underfoot. The lines of mounted police moved forward, but this time the activists had been ready for the horses. I see no point in describing in detail what they did; it harrowed me at the time, and it harrows me still. What I do remember is that at one point I glanced across, appalled, at the girl. She sat motionless, her eyes on the screen, and the expression on her face was one I shall never forget. It was a look not of anger or disgust, but of sadness, a sadness so profound — and here I must once more put down my impression to the strange power of the place in which we sat — that she seemed in that moment a Madonna, knowing and taking to herself the sum of human suffering, the suffering that has always been and that will be, to the end of time.

The newscast ended, and Boulter switched the set off, turned its face once more slowly to the wall. And undoubtedly I was hypersensitized, for in that gesture too I seemed to see an infinity of significance; it was as if the machine itself might be shamed by the obscenities it had had to show.

Sarah didn't speak, after the program ended; she walked out to the kitchen, quiet as ever, began to tinkle with cups. She returned with more coffee, white this time and sweet, and I blessed her for the thought. We drank, silently, and she collected the cups, stacked them to one side. She kissed us both, carefully, on the lips, and said, "Good night."

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I think the womanly, grossly unexpected touch roused me from the queer mood of despondency into which I had fallen. The disquiet ebbed fractionally, to be succeeded by the new and equally illogical thought that what we had seen was somehow urgently connected with the place in which we sat and with Boulter's reasons for persuading me there. I turned to him, and he spread his hands. He said, "It's all right, Glyn. I know."

He crossed the room, came back with a little occasional table. On it he set glasses and the brandy. He said, "I always think better with something in my hand." He reached across and poured.

I said, "Alec, what is this place? What's going on? Why did you ask me down?"

He lit one of his rare cigarettes. He said, "Answering in order, you know what the place is already. It's a small Dorset chalk village, the site of a radically new experiment in power generation. As to what's going on, to answer honestly, I don't know. Not yet. Why did I ask you down? Because something, I'm not clear what, is about to happen. And I wanted you in on it. There are forces working here that I frankly don't understand. I feel them, you feel them, Sarah feels them. I want to know more about them."

Something suddenly crossed my mind. I said, "Boulter, if it's anything to do with poltergeists —"

He laughed, for the first time that evening. He said, "Not this time, Glyn, you've got my word. This is a straightforward investigation; ghosts needn't apply."

I said, "Alec, what about Sarah? Why is she here?"

He laughed again. He said, "She still worries you, doesn't she?" He swirled his brandy thoughtfully, palm cupped round the glass, and sipped. He said, "As I explained, she's rather good with a Tarot pack. In fact, she has a better than normal psi ability. The psychology department ran some tests a couple of sessions back, you know, the standard card thing. Stars and wavy lines. She came out very well. Nothing to blow the mind, but high enough to be interesting. I thought that might be useful."

I said slowly, "She's ... different." I realised the banality of the remark of course as soon as the words were spoken, but for the life of me I couldn't find a better phrase for what was in my mind.

Boulter smiled. He said, "She takes life as it comes, Glyn. That's the rarest thing about her."

He got up again, took a book from one of the shelves, sat with it in his hands. He said, "As regards what *may* be going on, this is as good a start as any. It was written

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in the twenties by a man called Alfred Watkins. It's about leys."

It rang a bell. I remembered there had been sporadic interest in leys and ley-hunting for years; there was even a magazine for ley buffs. The theory was that, for reasons nobody could explain, sites of ancient importance — earthworks, churches, standing stones, sometimes even very old trees — tended to align. I'd heard some extraordinary claims made and seen some impressively marked Ordnance Survey sheets, but I'd never been able to see the real point, and certainly nothing conclusive had ever been proved. I said, "I know the theories, more or less. So what?"

Boulter said, "I think there's a bit more to it than theory. For instance, listen to this." He opened the book and read.

The revelation took place when Watkins was sixty-five years old. Riding across the hills near Bredwardine in his native county, he pulled up his horse to look out over the landscape below. At that moment he became aware of a network of lines, standing out like glowing wires all over the surface of the country, intersecting at the sites of churches, old stones and other spots of traditional sanctity.

I said, "Good Lord," and Boulter nodded. He said, "Interesting, ain't it? And that's not the only time it's happened; it's been reported by various people since. And there's something else. At odd times certain of these features — standing stones are beggars for it — seem to acquire the funniest damn characteristics. There's a whole sheaf of reports of people, usually Sensitives, psychometrists, dowsers sometimes, being physically blown back by touching prehistoric stones. The *Ley Hunter's* full of it, I've got a stack of copies over there."

I lit up myself. I said, "Come on, Alec, that's going it a bit strong."

He nodded. He said, "That's what I thought myself. Until I saw it happen to Sarah."

I hadn't noticed, before, how quiet the little valley was. No cars now, or sounds of voices; you could hear the crickets singing, a shrill susurrus of sound. I said, "Alec, you'd best start at the beginning."

He grinned. He said, "That's easy. It started with Sammy Farnham."

I nodded. That figured. A lot of bizarre things did.

Boulter blew smoke. "He did a guest lecture at the university a couple of years back," he said. "One of his fund-drumming tours. Some of our people went along. As a result the department was swept by a wave of archaeological enthusiasm. A dozen or so of us — some

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staff, mostly students — decided on a working holiday in the long vacation. A dig Sammy was organizing, in Cornwall. He was trying to convince everybody he'd found a Roman villa down there. In fact, he hadn't. Not even Sammy can win them all."

He looked reflective. "Sarah, as she said, is a department secretary," he said. "And a damn good one too. She came down for the experience. Quite an experience it was too. Sammy with the bit between his teeth can be a holy terror. I told him more than once all he really needed was a stockwhip and a few sets of leg irons."

He sipped his brandy again. "One day a few of us took off to see some standing stones Sammy wanted a look at. I took a camera along to get some record shots. There was one really big monolith out on its own, away from the rest. Yet another of the ubiquitous Devil's Arrows. Sarah was intrigued by it. I was setting the camera up, I wasn't paying all that much attention. I remember somebody shouted across to her, pulled her leg. Something about phallic symbolism being out of date. Then she touched it."

He set the glass down. He said, "It was like a condenser discharging, Glyn. It must have knocked her six or eight feet."

I said, "Nasty."

Boulter pursed his lip. "Yes," he said, "it was nasty. I thought it had killed her for a minute. So did Sammy."

He stubbed the cigarette. "By the time we got to her she was sitting up," he said. "Nobody quite knew what to do for the best. She couldn't remember a thing, reckoned afterwards she must have passed out for some reason. Anyway, she didn't seem to be hurt, just shaken up. We got her in the car and took her back to the hostel. And I spent the rest of the week working on that bloody stone."

I said, "What did you do?"

Boulter snorted. "Easier to say what I didn't," he said. "I had an idea for a time it had actually formed an electrode, strata underneath creating some sort of wet-cell effect. So we started testing for sol ph. But there wasn't anything out of the ordinary. We tried it for hot spots, we tried the lot. Sammy even got a pal over with some infrared gear. Nothing."

I said, "And Sarah?"

Boulter shrugged. He said, "Silliest part of the whole damn thing. She came over again a few days later. Just before we packed up. Walked up and clapped her hand on it. Wanted to know what we were all mucking about at."

He reached to the shelves beside him, pulled out a thickish folder.

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He said, "You might like to have a look through these as well; some of them are interesting. These are the record short of the monolith. Nothing much there. These are better. This is one of the famous alignments, from Old Sarum through Salisbury Cathedral spire to Clearbury Rings the other side of the town. You can see the ley just touches the side of the earthwork, that's typical. If you project the line northwards, it goes through Stonehenge. There's the Ordnance sheet there, see, with it marked out. I took the shot myself just to check it."

There was more of the material, much more. He'd evidently had a busy few months. I leafed through the folder; eventually I laid it down. I said, "Well, it's certainly interesting. And the story about the stone is the oddest thing I've heard. But I don't see where it gets us. The day I get funny feelings standing on a ley I'll maybe change my mind."

He grinned at me again. He said, "Are you trying to tell me you haven't?"

I stared at him. I don't know why, till that moment, the glaringly obvious hadn't registered. I'm not normally quite that dim. I said, "You mean ..."

He nodded. He said, "Exactly. Ley House. It's built right across one, we're sitting almost at the focus."

He got up and walked to the glass wall, stood staring out and down. He said, "St. Nicholas' is dead in line. From the top of the tower you can see Barrington Clumps. It's an Iron Age hill fort, but you can bet the site's a lot older. There's another little earthwork, only a few feet high, about a mile farther on. Then a standing stone, a big one, just outside Worthingham. Then a couple more churches and a hill called Five Barrow Down. That speaks for itself. The alignment finishes on the coast, little stone circle in a wood. Like a model of Avebury, same lingam-yoni pairs. North, there's nothing much till you get to Cerne. This was a bit of a dead patch. Until Sammy got going."

I looked up to where, in darkness, lay the great hill figure. I said, "*That's* why he went helicopter riding."

Boulter nodded. He said, "He's as big a ley buff as anybody. And there were clues. Giant's Copse, for one. We couldn't trace the name back farther than the late middle ages, but Sammy reckoned there was no smoke without fire. He found the Great God Mai. It was there all right, Glyn, I saw the survey pictures. The originals, before he started cutting."

I said, "Alec, what the hell are the leys? Why did people build on them, to mark them?

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He said, "We're really back to your original Question Two. I don't know *what* they are. As for building to mark them ... nobody can tell, I certainly can't. But I've got a feeling — nothing I can prove, just something in my water — that it's the other way about. People are drawn to build on them, God alone knows why."

I thought of the huge turbine up on the hill. Coombe Hasset One, and her sisters. I said, "Then you think —"

He was ahead of me. He said, "The Big Fans? The Lord knows. Again, I saw the original survey work for them. I talked enough about them, to everybody I could get hold of. The village was throbbing with site people, of course, while construction was going on. They put up anemometers by the dozen, computer-processed the data; there's cast-iron technical reasons for the siting of each one. But ... three are on the ley, smack on it, one about a hundred yards off. One's a bit farther away again, about a quarter of a mile. But I reckon it's close enough." Close enough for what, he didn't say.

I said, "Alec, something you mentioned a few minutes ago. About a focus. *Have* you found something out about these things?"

He said, "Yes and no. Found something aggravating, at any rate." He walked to the shelves again. He said, "Remember these?"

I said, "Good God, yes. Gold-leaf electroscope. Thought they'd gone out of fashion."

He nodded. He said, "Once the pride of every grammar school lab. You don't see them about so much now. This is rather a nice one. Dick Campbell — the guy who owns this pad — picked it up in a secondhand shop somewhere. He also noticed something about it. Observant man, is Dick. Watch this." He walked toward me slowly, holding the glass-fronted case in his hands.

I said, "Do that again."

He canceled the charge by stroking the electrode with his finger, and obliged. At the same point, near the center of the room, the tiny metal leaf once more trembled and stood out rigidly from its support. I said, "This a party trick, Alec?"

He shook his head. He said, "I keep those for parties. Try it yourself."

I did. The same result. I said, Does it happen every time?"

He nodded. He said, "Eight out of ten."

I returned the thing to the shelf, sat down thoughtfully, Boulter rejoined me. I said, "One thing's certain. Whatever you're measuring is mighty small."

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He said, "I don't think that's really a conclusion we can draw. After all, we're not dealing with a so-called 'normal' electromagnetic effect. If we were, I could pick it up other ways. I think somehow we're using the wrong instrument. Like trying to measure sunspot activity with a seismograph." He frowned. He said, "If you work carefully, you can plot a dead-straight line. It comes in through the end wall there, just by the Nash repro. Passes across just ... here, and goes out eighteen inches from the frame of the glass wall. By the arm of that far airmchair."

It was a queerish thought. I said, "And you reckon whatever it is, you can't detect it any other way?"

He said, "Nope. Tried, of course. With modern galvanometers. No joy. It seems it — whatever 'it' might be — just has a hankering for precious metals." He nodded at the shelf. He said, "Neither will our friend repeat the performance anywhere else. I've walked across leys — known leys — with it till I'm giddy. Even took it on the Sarum trip. It didn't want to know."

I said, "That's crazy."

He brooded. He said, "Maybe so. But to me it does rather suggest another possibility. Something that happened here to ... activate whatever we're measuring, whatever the gold leaf can feel."

I said, "The only new thing's the Big Fans."

He nodded. He said, "That's the way my mind was running too. But I doubt somehow if it's the fans themselves. You heard what Mike was saying, about burying all their gear. There's more miles of cable running through this ley now than I care to think about. And very shortly they're going to slap thirty kilovolts through it."

Suddenly it wasn't a cheering thought. I said, "But that's not for weeks yet," and he turned to eye me oddly. He said, "Wrong again, Glyn. They're running a full power test tomorrow night. In just under twenty-four hours time."

When I finally got to bed I found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that I couldn't sleep. The odd tension I had already felt seemed to throb, fed undoubtedly by what I had heard, through the very fabric of the house. I turned and tossed, thinking of the strange girl Sarah, lying sleeping somewhere close or maybe as watchful as I. And going over too what Boulter had told me of tomorrow's test. No, *today's* test of course. How he had come by the information he had not divulged; but it seemed the government, alarmed by the steadily growing threat posed by Hebden and his

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minions, had ordered a full scale runup of the system in complete secrecy. Coombe Hasset One would be the first station to come on line, at twenty-three hundred hours; the others would follow at one or two minute intervals till the whole system was alight. The test would run for an hour; then the Big Fans would shut down in reverse order, hopefully just after midnight. The army would obviously have been alerted; we could expect a discreet but tight cordon round each of the units till the test was over. Boulter's only worry was in fact that we might be herded out ourselves. As far as I was concerned, that might not be a bad thing. I couldn't see what could possibly happen, still less what could go wrong, but Alec had had hunches before, and I'd learned to trust them. If he was expecting some startling development, that was good enough for me.

The air seemed sultry and thick. I lay sweating, hearing a clock somewhere in the house that chimed the quarters and halves, and sleep seemed as far away as ever. When I did finally doze I was troubled by a recurring dream. It was as if some great dim army was passing along the coombe. I couldn't see it, but I could hear the rustle and sigh of voices, the tramp and weary shuffle of feet, the heavier rumbling of wheels. The rumbling grew louder by degrees, till a crash directly overhead jerked me awake. I sat up and the noise came again, accompanied by a violet glare from the window. A full scale storm was raging; I could hear now, mixed with the peals of thunder, the roar of rain on the roof. I padded across to close the casement, stood awhile peering out at the hill; but the lightning, though intense, gave no more than glimpses of the machine that straddled its crest, and those vague and illusory. The storm moved away finally, grumbling into distance, and I dozed again, opening my eyes once more sometime after dawn.

Something impelled me to swing out of bed again. I leaned on the sill and stared out at the swell of down, vague and grey in the early light, Farnham's Folly glimmering on its flank. The great bulk of chalk hid the rising sun, but some effect of refraction outlined the great cone that topped it with the thinnest imaginable rim of fire. I pushed at the window, leaned to catch the scent of wet leaves and grass; and my attention was taken by some movement in the denser shadows near the house. I peered again, but I had not been mistaken. Sarah stood there quietly, barefoot on the grass. Her arms were at her sides; she was motionless and seemed to be

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staring up. Her pale night-things moved a little in the dawn breeze.

I must have watched, uncertainly, for some minutes. Then I lay back on the bed, in two minds whether or not to go down. If she cared to walk in the garden on an early summer morning, it was strictly her own affair; on the other hand, there was the possibility she might be unwell. Though why I should feel such sharp concern for an acquaintance of hours I couldn't understand. Altogether the problem seemed insoluble; I closed my eyes to think about it more clearly, and alas for good intentions. The next thing I remembered was Boulter hammering cheerfully on the door, announcing that tea was on and that the bath water was hot. I groped for my watch, swearing, and it was five to nine.

Sarah seemed her usual self at breakfast, pretty, quiet and grave. It was I who felt distinctly below par. The disturbed night had played havoc with my already-overstrained nerves, to the extent where one half of me would have liked nothing better than to pack up and leave there and then. Partly, it was the girl's presence that prevented me; the magnetism she seemed to exert, with neither intention nor effort. And yet I felt nothing that could conventionally be termed desire. Somehow, it seemed sufficient that she existed and that I could watch her, her deft, light movements, her calm, lovely face, the fall and swing of her dark hair. If she was aware of my fascination she paid no heed, though once she turned and smiled one of those inimitable slow smiles, neither provocative nor resentful. I found myself wondering how many men, and women too perhaps, she had attracted in her handful of years. It seemed she was surrounded by an almost tangible aura, a life force; and I remembered a description of a machine, invented by a Russian, by means of which the aura of any man or woman could be rendered visible. The psyche, the very soul perhaps, snapping and flashing in colored searchlight beams. The notion brought a wholly unexpected rush of feeling. I blinked and pushed my plate away, half rose before I realized. The magic of the ley had me in its grip again.

The weather had freshened after the storm. A westerly was blowing, driving white-piled clouds fast above the little valley. Coombe Hasset One, her blades still feathered, sat grandly on her hill. Somebody, I saw, had rigged a bright windsock beside the turbine housing. It streamed steadily, veering slightly in the gusts. Listening intently, one could hear the seethe and hiss of the high hill grass. Mixed with it was another

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sound, deeper and booming, like distant surf; the wind-voice passing through the great still machine.

Boulter had once more lowered the glass wall into its recess. I sat on the veranda till midmorning, reading desultorily from Alfred Watkins' strange book. At eleven Alec strolled through to ask if I fancied a drive down Beaminster way, as Sarah wanted to shop. That was fine by me. He brought the Range Rover round and we bumped off down the steeply climbing track, Sarah behind us on the broad back seat. Five minutes from the village, Boulter pointed. He said, "Coombe Hasset Three."

The big funnel was facing away from us, half hidden by the high swell of the down on which it stood. Its dural panels gleamed new and silver in the morning light. Figures were moving below it, small as ants, and a line of high green trucks were pulled up beside the road. At Coombe Hasset Five the army was again very much in evidence. I saw what looked to be a command vehicle, near it three of the APC's Boulter had mentioned. We got a better view of the generator, closer to the road this time, poised above an intervening copse like a vast misplaced aero-engine. Staring up as the Rover drove past, I found the shifting perspectives of trees and grass momentarily giddying. It was as if the turbine itself was moving, sailing grandly against the intense sky.

Boulter explained that the road we were following swung away at this point from the line of the ley. We followed the contour of a spur of downland, turned right again; and he pointed out the standing stone he had described, dark and aloof in a corner of a wheatfield. Beyond it the spire of a half-hidden church marked the blue. I half glanced back at Sarah, but if she remembered her odd experience, she made no comment. She watched the thing calmly as we passed, then put her hair back and grinned at me.

The shopping was largely accounted for, timewise at least, by an hour spent in a little boutique that had caught Sarah's eye, during which she tried innumerable colored kerchiefs round the crown of a floppy straw hat before finally settling for the one she had started with. We lunched at a little pub of Boulter's choice, an unprepossessing looking place that nonetheless still managed to serve local crab and lobster, drove south again past the sprawling miles of caravans that eclipse West Bay and up onto the coast road above the Chesil Bank. At the high point Boulter pulled onto the hard berm, and we sat awhile unspeaking, watching the vast silver crawl of the sea

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toward the curving reef of pebbles. The cloud was thickening now, still moving up from the west; the breeze blew cool and steady, shivering the downland grass. A shallow front was coming in; the Coombe Hasset chain would have good conditions for its maiden run.

We turned inland finally, worked our way by slow degrees across the great upthrusting spine of Dorset. The breeze held steady, chasing patchworks of sun and shadow across the vaster patchwork of the land. It should have been a memorable drive, but to the unease I had felt was now added a foreboding as formless as it was powerful. Again it seemed as if something, some thought or notion born of the miles on miles of sea, the seething grass, seemed all but ready to surface into consciousness. I grappled with it finally, but it had slipped away.

Sunlight mellowed the old buildings of Coombe Hasset, and the pubs were setting open their doors. By common consent we pulled in beside The Grapes. It's a memory that has stayed very clear with me. The low, wide saloon, empty as yet of other customers; the raftered ceiling, sun striking through the latticed windows fronting the street; and Sarah perched on a bar stool, her new hat beside her, drinking bitter solemnly from a dimpled pint mug that seemed too big for her fist.

The army — the "brown jobs," our host insisted they should be called — had, we learned, been active through most of the day. Detachments had been stationed at the control bunkers and the turbine itself, while staff officers accompanied by civilian police had made house-to-house calls advising the inhabitants to avoid the hill and the vicinity of the generator from nightfall onwards. In consequence the village was buzzing with rumors. Though news of the impending test had not been leaked, it was obvious something highly unusual was afoot. The national newscasts had been largely preoccupied with the events of the day before in Parliament Square. Hebden, in a lunchtime interview, had disclaimed responsibility for the actions of his supporters and had announced he intended to fight to the last a proposed High Court injunction restraining him from organizing further demonstrations. The landlord's views on that, as on the rest of the affair, were succinct; Hebden, in his opinion, should be "put against a bloody wall, and bloody shot." I find it strange to think, now, how nearly that wish came true, at the end of a night that was a thousand years long.

We drove back up to Ley House, to where the great lilac flowers still bowed and nodded and

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the stream still ran, roaring, through the ancient sluice. Boulter switched off, coasting the big car to a halt, and the tension that was in me could no longer be held in check. I said, "Alec, what do you intend to do?"

He was halfway from the car. He looked back thoughtfully for a moment; then he said, "Wait, mainly. We can't really make any plans till we see what develops. I'd like to get out on the hill later on, though that might not be possible with the army there. We'd best make a reccy when the light starts to fade."

The girl had gone ahead to the house. I hesitated, rubbed my face. I said, "I'm not too happy about Sarah. I don't think she ought to come."

He raised his brows slightly and considered. He said, "We *should* be OK. I don't intend any of us sticking our necks out too far. Anyway, it's a bit late. It's what she came down for."

As an answer, it was unsatisfactory, but I couldn't really marshal any convincing arguments against it. And in any case it was Boulter's show, not mine; I was just an invited observer. I shaved and showered, asking myself for the hundreth time just what the hell could go wrong anyway. But it was no use; the nagging fear remained. I dressed and walked back downstairs, hearing the strains of the hi-fi float up to meet me. Boulter, predictably, was playing Britten. He'd introduced me to his music years back; it was yet another thing for which I was indebted to him.

None of us felt much like eating; Sarah temporized with a plate of open sandwiches. We sat as the light began to fade, drank frosted lagers, and listened while the power flowed and built again in the room and I heard music that it seemed I'd never really heard before — the Serenade, the Blake settings, the Nocturnal for Guitar — that anyway for me had always been filled with jaunty, ragged ghosts. Finally, Boulter shook his head. He said, "Enough of that, I fancy." He turned to a disk I didn't know well, Fanshawe's *African Sanctus*. As the first huge hammered quarter notes rang through the room, a strange thing happened. Sarah rose, ran to the great opening in the wall to stand head bowed. She turned, seeming to stare at us; but the gaze was remote, passing beyond us, beyond the room, the great machine on the hill. She raised her hands and, slowly at first, began to dance.

It's another ineradicable memory. The great room, the broad pouring of light against which she moved all but in silhouette; the flow and throb with which the place

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seemed filled, and that mingled now with the lapping rhythms of the music. That same pulsing seemed to absorb, and ultimately to emanate from, the body of the girl-woman as she turned and spun. Yet emanating from her too was a strange calm joy, so that almost I saw, in her face as it caught the light, the Madonna of the night before. She tantalized, she provoked; yet somehow it was both for and not for us. Almost it was as if — another strange fantasy, induced no doubt by the surroundings, the odd mood into which I had allowed myself to fall — she danced for all the folk of all the ages; and the odd thought came that this moment, like all moments, was preordained. It had always been true, since the leys themselves were young, that at this exact point of time she would do thus and thus, that her body would make just these shapes against the sinking redness, occupy these exact volumnes of space. It would still be true that this had been so, when the Earth fell into the sun.

The pickup arm rose with a tiny click, and Boulter let a few moments elapse before walking quietly to the tuner-amp. Another click, and the red and green beacons died. He said gravely, "Thank you, Sarah. Now I think it's time we took a walk."

She was disheveled and I thought not a little dazed, as if the impulse that had gripped her had surprised her equally. She had dropped to her knees; now she rose without complaint, and her breathing steadied. She said, "I'll get a woolly," and walked ahead of us toward the kitchen.

It was in fact a little after ten. We left the house silently by the side door, filed down to the bridge. An afterglow lingered, high in the western sky, but the shadows under the trees were velvet dark. I stepped carefully, hearing the steady roar of water, and felt the girl touch my arm. I made out the railing, dimly, and Boulter standing staring up past the outbuildings of the farm to the field gate, the dark swell of the horizon. He said softly, "I think we'll try the first copse, Glyn. Through the gate and up round to the right. OK?"

I said, "Fine by me."

He said, "Mind where you put your feet. It gets a bit rough farther on."

He set the way, the girl followed, I brought up the rear. My eyes, now, were used to the dark. The trees ahead showed as a blue-brown pall, like smoke. Above the copse the sky was brightening. There would shortly be a moon.

We reached the gate without incident, stopped again to listen. But the night was quiet. To our left was the great sweep of the down,

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topped by the long bulk of the turbine housing; to our right, the deeper blackness of the wood that clung to the flank of the chalk hill. The gate catch creaked; Boulter eased through, moved on again. He halted in the shadow of the trees. He said, "Ten fifteen. So far, so good."

The glow on the horizon was brightening rapidly. I could make out now the pale smudge of the girl's face as she stood beside him. I pointed. I said, "Alec, what's across there? Above the farmhouse?"

He said, "More trees. Some scrub. Then you come out on the hill."

I said, "We'd be closer in, if we could get there. On the ley itself. If that's what you want."

He shook his head. He said, "I don't want to have to start explaining things to a nervous squaddie."

The girl spoke then, softly. She said, "They're there. But I think they're higher up. Near the turbine."

He stared down at her for a moment. Then he said, "Right, let's go then. Before it gets too bright."

We crossed the open ground, cautiously. A few minutes' scramble over an unexpectedly steep slope, and we reached the fresh cover. Boulter moved uphill once more, cautious as a cat, and suddenly we were on the edge of the copse. Ahead, nothing but the high bulk of the down, across which the wind raced with a steady sibilance, and the great mass of the machine, touched now dimly with light.

"And this," said Boulter, "is far enough."

We waited, stared up. Voices drifted to us as the pubs emptied in the village, once the revving of a car. A dog barked, fell quiet; the seething of the grass reasserted itself. Above the opposing wood, the moon showed a smoky orange rim, and the girl gripped my arm.

I said, "Alec, she's moving."

He said, "Yes. I know."

Slowly, soundlessly, the big shape above us was altering; foreshortening as the housing nosed into the wind. In the control room, Coombe Hasset One would have been given over to her computers; soon, at their command, the feathered vanes would rotate, the turbines begin to spin. The wind rose, whispering across the hill.

I rubbed at an ear irritably and swallowed. But the odd effect persisted. Like a little wad of air pressing against each drum. And surely too the hill itself was trembling; a deep vibration, more felt than heard, accompanied by waves of an emotion not readily identifiable. I bent, stupidly, to

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press my hand to the grass and heard Boulter laugh. He said, "She's on line, Glyn. Dead on time."

I didn't answer. I was experiencing the oddest sensation of giddiness and disorientation. The effect was not unlike that of a high-speed elevator, but this fall seemed endless, and accelerating. The hillside, I knew, was firm under my feet, and yet I fell. I was aware, dimly, of Boulter standing feet apart, holding a wrist up in front of his face. He said, "Two's in," and I saw him drop his hand, as if conducting.

The dizziness worsened. I fell to my knees and saw the girl do the same. Somewhere beneath us, thirty thousand volts were pulsing through the ley; I felt an urgent need to lie flat, prone, spread my weight on the unstable earth. Boulter said, "Three's in," and I said, "*Let's get out of here ...*"

He still had his watch held in front of his face. He seemed oblivious. He said, "There goes Four ..."

If I couldn't trust my feet, at least I could crawl. I started making efforts in that direction but was hampered; the girl was clinging hard to my arm. I tried to pull away, and Alec said quietly, "Look ..."

I turned, and I think for a moment my jaw must have dropped. Between us and the village, wavering and shifting but brightening as I watched, stretched a broad band of milky light. The church tower was bathed in it; and trees, barns, buildings, the old mill, glowed with the spectral beauty of St. Elmo's Fire. Gable ends flashed and sparkled, coruscating, while we ourselves were lapped by the brilliance so that I saw Sarah's startled face clear, her eyes huge as she once more yanked at my arm, pointed wordlessly back up the hill. I turned my head, it seemed with difficulty, and saw the grandest sight of all. Coombe Hasset One was lit from end to end, as if by powerful searchlights; below the machine the shining track, intense now and blue, stretching down the hill and, on the instant, began to *pour*.

Boulter said, or shouted, "Five's in ..." But I was incapable of useful movement and all but incapable of thought. The giddying sense of speed increased, bringing with it the new and extraordinary notion that it was us, not the strange plasma, who were moving, whirling through space at break-neck speed toward a wholly unknown destination. Yet fast as we raced, the turbine, the generator, the whole gigantic machine fled before us, away and down the brilliant pathway that opened before it, eddied in its wake. I

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seemed now wholly disoriented, so that though I gripped the ground with my hands, felt the very grass of the hill, I was unable to rid myself of that terrible notion of progression. Rather, the speed seemed increased, and increased again; and I noticed something else, something later confirmed by Boulter. A secondary motion, a rolling, almost a swaying from side to side, like a railway car moving at dangerously high speed. This sensation I found if anything more distressing than the first, while I despair of describing adequately the awful fetch and check when without warning both motions ceased, simultaneous with the strange glow clicking off. I fell headlong into a darkness as sudden and total as the throwing of a switch.

And that I thought, scrambling to my feet, was exactly what had happened; the waking of the ley, the great river of light, had alarmed the engineers as it had alarmed me. I felt a flooding of relief, but it was short-lived. Boulter shouted again, his voice harsh with alarm. *"Get back, Glyn, quick, Back into the trees ..."*

I've done a lot of thinking since about the time we spent in the power of the ley. It was a confused and confusing experience, more akin to a dream state than what I had thought of, up to that time at least, as reality. Thus, although I heard his voice, although I felt the grip of his arm, I think I was aware even at the time that this was not, in some subtle way, the Alec Boulter with whom I had set out less than an hour before to climb the down. I was however given little time to ponder; I was forced back by the shove he gave me into the shadows of the undergrowth. I stumbled, almost fell, and turned to see a wave of men come flooding down and across the shoulder of the hill. Who or what they could be I had no idea, but of their intentions at least I was left in no doubt. The force was opposed by another, and a confused battle began, yells and shouts mingled with a clashing and ringing for which at the time I was wholly unable to account. The intervention at least won us the few seconds we needed; I moved back hastily, clutching Sarah's wrist, staring over my shoulder at the hillside that seemed now inexplicably outlined by fire. I saw the flames lick and spread, and by their light the battle moved downwards, fanning out toward the fringe of trees. I saw something else, too, in the growing light. The machine that had topped the down was gone, vanished, as though it had never been.

I have said the experience was confusing, but why I should have felt nothing in the way of surprise

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still seems bizarre. I was, it seemed, not susceptible to surprise; rather it was as if the fact, monstrous in any other context, fitted into a matrix the logic of which I accepted though as yet could not understand. Neither, apparently, was I susceptible to fear, though in retrospect there would seem to have been ample cause; for Coombe Hasset itself also vanished, shops and pubs, houses and cottages, mill and church. Where the village had stood now clustered some score or more of dome-topped huts, their walls of mud, their shapes like that of old-fashioned beehives. They seemed deserted, though from the low entrance of one — little more than a hole — came a flickering of firelight.

We must have passed at some point in our flight through the space that had been occupied by Ley House itself. Certainly the valley side seemed familiar, a rough grass slope stretching to the stream. The stream still flowed, but broader and flatter, negotiable near the foot of what had been the lawn by a series of well-worn stepping stones. We hurried across them, driven on by the noise from behind, and I became aware for the first time that we were not alone. Through the darkness to the left and right moved what seemed scores of folk; there were groans and little cries, the creaking of wheels, once what sounded like the whinny of a horse. It was the dream of the night before over again, but this time I was part of it, a fragment impelled by a relentless current that drove us on through the village, out onto the broad rutted road beyond.

The notion of a dream remained with me, strengthened by the tricks my senses continued to play. I saw for instance that though it was apparently still night, the land to either side was by no means wholly dark. Hills and trees, the road itself, the dim moving masses of our fellow fugitives, seemed lit by a dull, rich glow that though omnipresent yet gave no real illumination. Also — and this too was a notion later confirmed by Boulter — there seemed to be a less than real feeling about the ground beneath my feet; it was as if I trod not on earth but on some strange elastic barrier of air above it, as thick and yielding as a carpet. Spatial dimensions likewise seemed confused, so that at times it was as if the dim horizon toward which we moved was nothing but a backdrop, drawn forward aggravatingly a few yards from our faces, while at others I was made crushingly aware of the vast dimensions of the land across which we trudged, our own locked and tiny isolation.

If the "space" that surrounded

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us was malleable to a degree, so too was the apparent time through which we progressed. It seemed our journey was endless; yet I was also conscious, initially at least, that the richness and variety of the impressions I received were crammed somehow into the passage of so many seconds. So how "long" we fled before that pursuing army, in the midst of that great shoal of fugitives, is a question that has no meaning. It was only the increasing weariness of our limbs, over what I must describe for want of a better term as hours, that convinced us we must seek shelter. I know I turned at one point to stare concernedly into the girl's face; I know the matter was discussed at length; but, strangely, of all the words uttered by me or the others during the experience almost none have been retained. I know "Sarah" put her hair back, sorrowfully, watching back at the place we had quitted; I know the shadow-Boulter pointed ahead to what looked like a cluster of tumbledown barns, urged us encouragingly over the last few yards. I retain a memory of great piled masses of hay or sweet-smelling straw; and also a curious sense of the richness of the interiors of those ruined buildings, though in what exact details that richness resided is now a matter of mystery. There were, I am almost certain, columns of some kind, the walls between them brilliantly colored and decorated, so much so that I must have made some comment, to Boulter or the girl, on the absurdity of stuffing such a place with hay. I know that others shared the refuge, breathing and turning restlessly, and I remember clearly the huge wave of weariness that swept me, the conviction that the devil himself with his legions behind him could not have driven us an inch further along the way. One curious detail does stand out, almost arbitrarily. The girl crying bitterly, with a face of dumb reproach, and Boulter bringing her water in an earthenware bowl, as if she was a puppy. After which we must have slept, though such were the curious inconsistencies of the time that it seemed the act of closing my eyes was the act of reopening them, and thought I sat up refreshed my mind shied from the notion of continuing the march.

Daylight, in the world of the leys, seemed as insubstantial and uncertain as the night. The sky was infused now with a coppery glow, an overcast like the half-light of an eclipse, through which the chalk hills on every side gleamed stark and bare. There was about them, about their exaggerated forms, something familiar, almost recognizable. Boulter later suggested their origins, from what rough sketches I could bring myself to

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make, in the work of Sutherland or Nash, though I am still unsure. Suffice it that in a strange way I "knew," and accepted, the landscape through which we moved, and something too of the nature and purpose of our journey.

Certainly it was with no surprise that I saw a cart drawn up outside the doorway of the strange place in which we had sheltered, a primitive affair, high-sided and with massive wooden wheels. Oxen drew it, bony, dispirited-looking creatures. Beside the driver, wrapped in a coarse-woven cloak, sat Boulter. I saw, again apparently without surprise, that he waved to us impatiently to join him. Certainly I was curious; I desired to know where he had procured the thing, more importantly how he had spoken to these people whose voices had sounded all night in my ears with no more sense than the gabbing of birds. He seemed to laugh at that, and I have a clear memory that he said, "*The Welsh is close enough*," which is curious. For although I have never spoken my mother's tongue, Boulter, for reasons known only to himself, is an expert.

There were other cloaks in the cart, of the same rough material, thick and harsh, like a sort of serge. I draped one round Sarah's shoulders. I remember with clarity the intricate, lovely pin with which it was fixed, and also, curiously, the *joy* derived from the simple act, at her touch, the light pressure of her shoulder against mine. She pushed at her sandals, the flimsy summer sandals she had worn, nestled into the hay with which the cart was piled and slept again, jostled and bumped, her head rolling against my shoulder.

It seems strange that we never questioned, or I never questioned, the urgent necessity for flight; nor can I explain the conviction that came over me that though our fellow travelers seldom came into sight, and almost never into close detail, an entire countryside was on the move around us. The sense of their presence, the mumbling din of a vast concourse, remained with us through the whole of what I must call a day, though — and this again is a point on which Boulter later agreed — the sound that reached us, though evocative, seemed possessed of a curious muffled hollowness. There was a flow and ebb to it too, so that at times it seemed remote and lulling as a summer sea, at others it dinned into my ears with a fierce urgency, becoming by turns the noise of gunfire, of traffic on some enormous motorway. This last effect distressed me to the point where I determined that, delicious though the dream-presence of Sarah had become, I must finally

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wake. For a time it seemed I was partly successful; certainly it was as if, ghostly round me, I saw the walls of the bedroom in Ley House, the bowl of flowers she herself had placed on the dresser. But that too was wrong. I remembered at least that our walk up the hillside had been no fantasy; if I slept, it was upon that hill, it was to the hill I must return. I relaxed my grasp and was glad to let the phantom slip away.

It was, as I have said, sufficient that we fled, from the soldiers, from the flames, from the drumming that carried fitfully on the wind. The cart wheels rumbled, stirring up clouds of whitish dust; those of our fellow travelers whose faces did swim into my vision stared up dully, but no move was made to molest us. At some point Boulter explained — he must have explained, or how could I have known so clearly — that the fame of "the strangers" had already gone abroad, that the people regarded us with superstitious awe, and that, above all, haste was essential. But this I already understood.

Sometime in the afternoon — I must judge the passing of that strange "time" as best I can — we reached a town, a massive, ruinous place with high white colonnaded buildings, paved, weed-choked streets. I would give much, even now, to recall its details; but the curious visual interference was then at its height so that it was as if we passed between two gigantic movie screens on which the images of columns, walls and porticoes swam insubstantial as clouds, falling away behind with exactly the distortion imparted at the field edges by an anamorphic lens. The girl, I remember, woke to stare laughing at the phantoms, pushed herself up on her elbows to see the stonework streaked with green and brown, the moss-grown roofs, the soldiers who surged round us. For we had come, it seemed, into the midst of a retreating army. I remember an old man, white-haired and seamed-faced, wearing a conical headdress of leather and rusting metal; a youth, wild-haired and green-eyed, his face alight with some strange passion that was perhaps the joy of battle. The air was filled with the jangle and clattering that had baffled me before, and at last I saw its cause. Both men and horses wore armor, plates and overlapping scales of the same rusty iron, surcoats of faded richness. I saw the banners that waved, saw the red dragons each one bore lap and cross, weaving; I saw buckles and rivets, the jeweled hilt of a sword, sweat that stained a horse's neck. Then the immediacy of vision faded, and we were once more alone. The hills crowded back, humped and steep, topped

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by tree groves that shone with dark, prismatic greens against the high dun of the sky.

Toward evening, we reached the sea; and once more I tried, as far as my bemused state would permit, to recognize the place to which we had come. It seemed at first that I was once more looking at the Chesil Bank; certainly there were lagoons, bird-dotted, ruffled by the wind, lit by a steely light. Yet I saw no curving offshore beach; the land ran out in ragged spits into the harsh water. A humped headland was crowned by the keep of a barbaric castle. Banners flew from it, dark against the eerie light; stockades surrounded it, ringed with torches. Other twinkling spots of light stretched into distance; the campfires of a massive army. Its din reached up to us. mixed with the droning of the wind.

The cart halted finally before a hide-stitched tent. A fire burned outside it, lighting the interior, the poles on which the leather was stretched; there were cooking pots, a straw-filled hassock, a little folding stool. Boulter had left us, on some errand of which it once more seemed I had foreknowledge. I supported, or half lifted, the girl from the cart, sprawled exhausted on the straw; and she pulled me to her. And now, certainly, the nature of the entire experience declared itself, for my knowledge of her was sweet beyond all possibility of earthly fulfillment, sweet with the sweetness of the dream-life itself. Here at least, for an instant, I was master of myself, one with the green-eyed, lovely youth, and one too, in a way I cannot adequately begin to explain, with all I had done and seen in those few hours that had seemed so rich, the boutique, the hat with its bright blue kerchief, the mill race and the trees, the high, golden down. I knew — how curious this seems now — that as she moved against me, so the fern fronds dipped and swayed, the water poured, folk woke and slept and laughed, the bright clouds sailed the sky. Till she lay laughing contentedly while I asked myself, again with the clarity, the sweet logic of dreams, why the actions performed should ever have seemed, in God's world, fraught with guilt, with uncertainty, with doubt, so simple, so inevitable had her responses seemed. It was as if, for the first time in my life, something had been given to me, given truly without condition or reserve; but the rush of emotion the idea brought in its wake is something on which I no longer choose to dwell. For it was borne in on me, in that same instant, that whatever I had learned, I had learned too late.

Sometime, Boulter returned. The sadness that had infected me

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seemed to have touched him also. I remember his face, in firelight and darkness, as he sat and talked, but, for the life of me, no words. And I was subsequently further confused by finding that his memories of the experience, insofar as he was able to recall them, tallied at almost no point with my own. But it seemed the time given to us, always short, was at an end; that the One he had talked to, who had made his great camp there by the sea, was old; that he, Boulter, had been questioned closely, as closely as language barriers would permit, on the manner of our arrival in this dim Time, and of our understanding of it; and that the old man — the King, my mind insisted — so near his own end, had been in some way eased, knowing that in our days too his name was known. For his part he had told what his own folk knew, or believed, of the leys. That even then they were old, old beyond reckoning; that they belonged to the first Time, the first Time of all, when the land of the Pretani heaved itself up out of the sea. And finally that we must go, and go in haste, that we must have no part in what was to befall. To this end, preparations had already been made.

What those preparations might have been, I have no idea; nor do I retain more than the most fleeting recollections of our subsequent journeying. For us, already, the ley-world was breaking, fragmenting, falling apart; and my memory is likewise fragmented: I see hands that gripped reins, bearded faces that split with grins, peytrels and horsemasks that swam glinting in the strange light. Certainly we saw the hills again; and equally certainly we stood, or reined, on a high tor, looked down on a plain of England mapped and lit by the glistening, brilliant lines, all the leys, as far as the eye could reach, awake and burning. This much they had done, all magic, all knowledge summoned to their aid in the last desperate fight. A name was on my lips. I would have spoken it, but instantly it seemed the wild flight was resumed, and we rushed once more headlong into the pouring blue. I knew I gripped the wrist of Sarah, of the dream-creature; I know her hair flew wild; I know I called her name; then again we were falling headlong. I called again, despairingly, and the turf that rose to meet me took my breath. But the next instant Boulter's hand was on my arm. He shouted urgently, "*Get back, Glyn, quick. Back into the trees ...*"

I got to my knees, and for a moment I was wholly unable to understand the noise that assailed my ears. A hard, metallic hammering, mixed with deeper crashes like explosions. Flashes lit

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the bulk of the hill in front of us; by their light I saw a wave of figures come scrambling and slipping down across the chalk. Something too seemed pattering and splashing through the branches over our heads, and my mind at last made the connection. I grabbed the girl's arm and ran back crouching. Her foot caught in something; she gasped, fell - sprawling. I was dragged off balance, and the pattering came again, mixed with another sound. A high, jarring scream, like a needle in the ears, that passed through the pain threshold and climbed again into supersonics. Boulter shouted something, his voice sharp. I lay stupidly, staring back. Flames were licking up, on the far slope of the down; by their light I saw Coombe Hasset One, just for an instant. Then for the second time that night the impossible seemed to happen. The huge funnel seemed to ripple, shaking from end to end; then it blew up. I watched fragments of dural sail, apparently in slow motion, high into the air; then the tail of the great machine dropped and sagged. I heard rather than saw the storm of shards that burst from the central section, fled shrieking in every direction. Something roared over our heads; I rolled over stupidly, I think to protect the girl; a stout tree sheared like a straw, I heard the massive top hamper of branches thud back down the slope. The thing sped on, howling, while other roars fled back like echoes, grumbling among the hills as station after station blew. And Boulter hammered the ground, saying over and over with a kind of vicious intensity, "Oh, the clever bastards. Oh, the clever bastards..." I said, or gasped, "What happened?" He swore at that and banged the grass again. He said, "Shorted a generator. Better than a bomb. Glyn, *get moving...*"

The shouting and firing were closer now, figures beginning to crash into the fringe of trees. We fled back down the slope, still towing the girl. I understood, at least in part. A generator running wild, seizing its geartrain, jamming, or attempting to jam, the huge spinning of the turbine blades above. Coombe Hasset One had exploded like a jet engine it had so much resembled, while in the same instant the massive surge of voltage, lashing forward and back along the chain ...

We fell through the kitchen door, the pursuit close behind. Boulter whirled to slam the bolts. He said, "Quick, Glyn, the other door. Then get down and stay there. Where's Sarah?"

I said, "The glass wall. We must have left it down." He swore again at that. He said, *Get the silly little bitch out of there...*"

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The fire was spreading now, the grass of the high down blazing fiercely. It lit the lounge with a flickering sunset glow. By it I saw the great pane rising into its frame and the girl pressed to the wall, seeming mesmerized, her hand still on the control. Beyond, figures were fanning out across the lawn. I ran for her and it was my turn to snag my foot. I measured my length and Boulter pounded in after me, a shotgun over his arm. He said, "The bastards aren't getting in here. Sarah, *get down*."

I'd got a light cord tangled round my ankle. I couldn't get it clear. The last of the attackers had reached the fringe of trees. I saw one turn, and I thought he pointed back at the house. A hammering, and the world split into sailing fragments. They lay bright and silent on the carpet, like slivers of firelight. The room seemed suddenly full of smoke.

Boulter was shouting again. The words didn't immediately register. I said, "The bastards got the window," and he said, "Get some towels man, cloths, anything."

I ran for the kitchen. I don't think I believed, at that point, that what I was seeing was real. I remember thinking, with a kind of urgent idiocy, that if we could only put Time back again, by thirty seconds, it would be enough. But that was ended of course. The leys couldn't help us now.

I suppose you've all seen those Westerns where the wounded heroine goes bravely on with her duties, wearing a fixed smile and a glamorous pink patch. But bullets aren't like that. Not for real. They smash what they strike; they burst it, bone, sinew, flesh. They spin their victims off their feet, knock them yards; it must be like being hit with a sledgehammer.

Boulter was kneeling on the floor, the girl in his arms. He grabbed for what I brought, bunched and pressed. He said, "We shall need more. Then get her on the settee. We shall want some blankets. For God's sake Glyn, be some bloody *use*." Then he grabbed for the shotgun, quick as a striking snake.

You think you know people, you think you've known them for years. But I didn't really know Alec Boulter. Not till then. He leveled the thing, rock-steady, and there was a moment when Hebden's life hung by a thread. He stood beyond the shattered wall, hands at his sides, an automatic slung across his shoulder. A wait, while the flames crackled on the hill; then he spread his hands, a queer little shrug that was almost a gesture of defeat. He said, "This shouldn't have happened. I'll get somebody to you." And he turned away.

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I don't remember all that much about the rest of that night. Or the day that followed. I know that for a while I sat by the bridge, the bridge that was just a bridge now, over a pointless, pretty brook. The tall plants shook and nodded; the water burbled while the sun climbed slowly, over the huge shards scattered on the hill, over Farnham's Folly, stark now against the burned grass. Later I did what I could to help. There were telegrams to be sent, phone calls to be made, shuttering to be fixed across the smashed glass wall. The blood that had dried on the carpeting seemed curiously unreal; thick brownish patches, any repertory company could have done better. Some ricochet had smashed the TV screen; we swept that mess up as well, repaired a couple of blown fuses, set the room to rights. At least the vhf tuner was intact; over it we heard something of the turmoil into which the country had been thrown. But little of it reached Coombe Hasset, at least for a while. Army teams worked up on the hill, loading fragments of the turbines into massive trucks that one by one trundled away; there were visits from military intelligence and the civil police, routine visits, statements to be made and taken.

Sometime, Boulter talked, about what we had seen and heard when the ley woke up. If indeed it ever woke at all, for it came to me even at the time that the shimmering stream of fire we thought we saw might itself have been part of some queer delusion. A delusion brought on by tiredness, by tension, by the overworked imagination. Though Boulter insisted, and I find it difficult to doubt, that something had been there, something blown away, perhaps forever, by the explosion at Coombe Hasset One. "Maybe we'll never know for sure now what the leys really are," he said. "Maybe what happened was an accident; some ... node formed, something unrepeatable. But we know just a little about what they can do."

He narrowed his eyes. "Remember Kirlian's cameras," he said. "All the vital spots of a man, or a rabbit, or a leaf, shining like stars. They turned out to be acupuncture points as well, by the way, did you ever read that?" I shook my head, dully, and he carried on musing aloud. "I think maybe one day," he said, "there'll be a Kirlian machine that can look at the earth itself. Plot out the nodes, the veins, like an electric map ... Then if a field won't crop, or land goes sour, we just come along with a big golden pin." He shook his head. "But there's more to it than that. Remember Low's ghost theory? About energy never

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being lost, only changing its state? Maybe when a thing like that gets started, everything that lives and dies adds to it, makes it grow. Maybe that's what Sensitives can tap, what we saw state-changed to a plasma. Then with the voltage surge ..." He passed a hand across his eyes. "Don't tell me I'm crazy, because I haven't got the energy to argue. But maybe that's how places get sacred. To all cultures. Our own, the medievals, the men who cut the Great God Mai. It would explain what we saw too. Why it was different for each of us. Think of it as a kind of hyper memory bank. You saw the time of Arthur. Because that was what you wanted to see. I saw ... well, it doesn't matter what I saw. Not any more." He rubbed his face again, and I realized for the first time that he was shockingly, incredibly weary. Far more exhausted than I.

Sarah spent several months in and out of the hospital. They saved her arm, though I heard afterwards from Boulter she'll never regain the full use of her fingers. I visited her, once. I don't think till then I'd realized the full implication of what Boulter had said, or the real direction of the tragedy. The aura, the thing that had made her vivid, alive, that had lit the very rooms she sat in with a psychic glow, was gone, blown away by the crashing glass, burned out with the breaking of the ley. Some part of her had joined to it, to that immortal Memory, and that had broken too. She was just a pretty, pale girl in a hospital bed, dark-ringed a little under the eyes, somebody's secretary, hurt in a Civil War. I walked out, into the noisy traffic of a west-country city, and I don't wish ever to experience the desolation of that moment again.

The remnants of the Big Fans, those fragments that weren't worth the carting, still lie, or so I've heard, where they fell, strewn on the hilltops where the wind still sends its megawatts of energy, night and day. But I doubt they'll be rebuilt in my lifetime, for Hebden finally had his way, and the government fell.

I no longer live in England. There's no place in it now, in the state Jimmy Hebden built, for people like me. I moved to a city, and a country, I'd never expected to see; and if for a time I lived in fear, that fear has mostly ebbed. This is my adopted place, and I think its people mean me no harm. Still, to an extent, I feel a stranger in a strange land, but I have at least that bleak consolation that it's not so strange as my own land has become.

My conviction, illogical but strong, is still that the leys themselves lent Sarah Trevelyan her strength, and the leys took part

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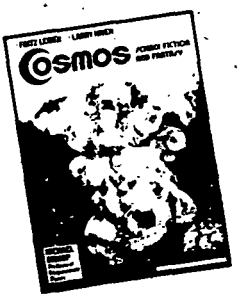

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of her away before its time. The real part, that will stay forever now locked and hidden. Certainly the pain I felt, the grief perhaps, prevented me for several years from setting this account down, but last week something happened to change my mind.

I had a letter and instantly recognized the hand. I tore the package open, began to read. It contained an invitation, from Boulter and from one Sammy Farnham, expatriates like myself, to spend a weekend a few miles from my home town, in Connaught. There was something else too. A large-scale map, marked with a network of crossing red lines. I'd known, of course, that the government had been deeply interested in wind-powered rigs at the time of the Coombe Hasset disaster and that money had been voted for an experimental chain, but not where they intended to set up the first turbines. *"Project this ley,"* writes Boulter, *"and you'll find it passes through the holiest place in Ireland ..."* So once more, I'm packing my things. Because I'd like to hear the harps of the Old Kings, and who knows? On one of them, perhaps the Shade of Sarah will be content to play.

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Rissa Kerguellen, the first half of a two-volume epic novel, *The Saga of Rissa,* is taken by Berkley/Putnam's jacket copy writer to have "the first science fiction heroine whose power and sexuality match her boundless ambition... in this Dickensian galactic fantasy." I am not so sure about this — C.L. Moore's Jirel of Jory was done with conviction and Marion Zimmer Bradley is no slouch at this kind of thing — but another question obtrudes: granted the billing, what nevertheless is the point? *Rissa Kerguellen* is Heinlein's *Citizen of the Galaxy* in reverse; it is orphaned-slave-Thorby-who-rises-to-claim-inheritance-of-his-crown as orphaned - welfare - client - Rissa - who - wins - lottery - and - rises - to - claim - Earth, and Rissa seems barely more of a sexual creature (at least in this first half; volume two, which will describe the "battle for the Earth" will presumably be released shortly) than Thorby. Busby writes about as well as middle-period Heinlein; he also evinces in the novel a series of political instincts which would not dismay the later-period Heinlein in the least or the late John W. Campbell. He is all for a spurious "individualism"; he sets up strawmen "social institutions"

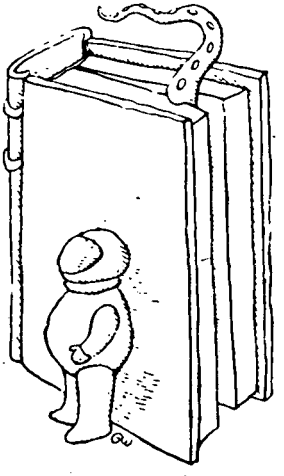
BARRY N. MALZBERG

Books

Rissa Kerguellen, by F.M. Busby. Berkley/Putnam, $10.00.

Shadrach in The Furnace, by Robert Silverberg. The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., $8.95.

Bibliographic Guides For Contemporary Collectors: Anatomy of Wonder: Science Fiction, edited by Neil Barron. R.R. Bowker Company, $14.95.



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which he then eviscerates. It is all very easy and pleasant, Heinlein twenty years later, and Putnam's attempts to couch this as something of a feminist project can be seen as little more than *obiter-dicta.* This is not at all a feminist novel; it is high-grade pulp fantasy done from the point of view of what is only incidentally a female, and it seems doubtful that it will do any better in a women's audience than would Heinlein. (Who does pretty well; I do not think that the science fiction audience, despite the emergence in recent years of a few genuinely feminist-concerned writers such as Russ or Kathleen Kurz, can be partitioned along these lines. Its tastes are remarkably homogenous.)

A novel such as *Rissa Kerguellen* might inspire, almost by reflex, despairing little essay #307 on How Depressing It Is That Changes Within The Culture and Advances in Literary Technique Do Not Really Penetrate The Genres Because This Novel Shows So Little Progress From *Citizen of the Galaxy* That It Makes The Struggles of So and So and This and That to Advance The Form Seem Hopeless. But whoever said that genre literature — or literature at all for that matter — had any investment in progress? Whoever said that the novel of convention and entertainment was contemptible? Whoever, for that matter, even said *Citizen of the Galaxy* was contemptible? (Not me; I love the stuff.) No, if there are points to be made against the books they would have to come on other ground having to do with how well, if at all, *Rissa Kerguellen* exemplifies its subgenre. Granted its antecedents and simple, archetypal structure (the *Bildungsroman* is still your basic science fiction plot) does it deliver the goods?

In fairness to Busby's ambition and Berkley/Putnam's it might be fairest to await the second half of what is obviously a bisected novel, but in bringing out the 150,000 word first half (at a very high price) to stand on its own both are obviously open to fair comment at this time. Fair comment is that Busby writes this kind of novel fairly well, that his scenes cohere at least internally and that he has managed the small accomplishment of male-author-female-protagonist with energy and skill. The story of Rissa's upbringing as a welfare client (wholly indentured for life to a state that seems remarkably like the New York City of ten years ago as pictured in the *National Review*) is interesting: her adventures in becoming a superwoman after winning the lottery are at least done with high good spirit. But the virtues begin to look like pretty thin gruel for an enormous construct: Busby's episodism is not grafted to that gift for picaresque invention

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which would be central to the *Bildungsroman*, his heroine quickly becomes a mechanical wish-fulfillment figure, and most particularly annoying, he resorts to a comic-strip contrivance early on which makes clear that he is manipulating his character and material without much intention of ever coming to terms with it. (Apparently doomed in a flight due to either sabotage or mechanical failure, Rissa turns out to be an "adrenaline freak" who under dangerous circumstances makes "things go very slow" so that she can safely guide the craft.) Volume II and its promised "fight for the Earth" does not promise much suspense.

Busby is fairly new to the field and has done a couple of promising, unambitious novels. I think he can go on but fear that he may regard *Rissa* as ambitious when it is merely extended.

From the opening page of Silverberg's novel:

> "...Dr. Mordecai is personal physician to Genghis II MAO IV Khan, Prince of Princes and Chairman of Chairmen — which is to say ruler of the earth ... the world leader sleeps less than twenty meters away, in a suite adjoining Mordecai's. Dictator and doctor occupy residential chambers on the seventy-fifth floor of the Grand Tower of the Khan... Mordecai knows all this because he carries, surgically inlaid in the flesh of his arms, thighs and buttocks several dozen minute perceptor nodes that constantly provide him with telemetered information on the state of Genghis Mao's vital signs... it is the Chairman's wish to postpone death until his work on earth is complete — which is to say, never to die."

And from the last page, Shadrach Mordecai, having neutralized what he is sure is the Khan's murderous attempts on the life of his all-too-personal physician by implanting a device which will kill the Khan at Mordecai's will:

> "He thinks of the laughter of Genghis Mao. How amused the Khan seemed at his predicament! How relieved, almost, at having the ultimate authority stolen from him!... He has planted a bomb in Genghis Mao, yes, but he has also seized a tiger by the tail and he must be careful lest he stumble between the metaphors and be destroyed... He stretches forth his left hand. He studies it as though it be a thing of precious jade, of rarest ivory. Tentatively he closes it, almost, but not quite clenching his first. He smiles. He touches the tips of his fingers to his lips and blows a kiss to all the world."

And it is all there in the intervening 90,000 words of what is, after all, a rather thinly-plotted

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novel: the complex and ambivalent attempts of Shadrach Mordecai to mediate a course for himself and the mysterious and terrible world of barely a third of a century hence.

The essential plot of this novel can thus be articulated in two medium-length paragraphs. This is clearly Silverberg's deliberate choice, because between these poles he has strung filament upon filament, all wound tightly through the persona of Shadrach Mordecai, a complex interweaving of character and background which produces one of the most detailed, literate and moving portraits of an imagined future ever to come out of science fiction, to say nothing of one of its richest characters.

I do not feel that this is Silverberg's best novel nor his best science fiction novel. The former, I still take to be *The Book of Skulls,* the latter the 1972 Signet original, *The Second Trip,* which few appear to have noticed. It may not even be the stylistic equal of *The Stochastic Man,* Silverberg's other California novel (which was serialized in this magazine). What it is, clearly, is his richest, his most patient, his most detailed work.

Here at last the limitations of Silverberg's youth are fully combed out. No more of the contrivances, the hasty endings, the arbitrary turns of situation characteristic of word-rate writing. *Shadrach* is wholly of itself, patient and comfortable within its confines. And I do not think — an extreme judgement but one which holds up after two careful readings — that there is a badly written or even a false line in this beautifully crafted book. Stylistically it comes as close to the flawless as any science fiction novel I can bring to mind.

And yet. And yet. I have had doubts about this novel ever since I was given the opportunity to read it in manuscript almost a year and a half before its publication, doubts which have little to do with the book, which I take to be a first-rate realization of its theme and implications, or with Silverberg, who I have long publicly and loudly taken to be the major if not only literary figure ever to come exclusively out of our field. The doubts have to do with science fiction itself. I wonder if it is possible for the genre ever to produce a true masterpiece.

Can it? Science fiction deals with the contrived, the imagined, the paradigmatic; it cannot by definition deal one-on-one with the contemporary reality which the artist funnels through his vision. To deal on the one-to-one basis with reality would obviously take the work out of the genre, and that is what disturbs me about *Shadrach:* I think that the book is in certain ways a shading off, a compromise. It is a revised draft of the literary

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novel which Silverberg might have wanted to write about 1975 (*not* 2012) but chose instead, for personal and market reasons to conform to the devices of the genre.

It is therefore a work which, like even the very best of science fiction, must to a certain extent be spurious ... atop the act of the imagination which is the novelistic art, it then imposes a second level of unreality, the projected world. I reluctantly submit two tentative conclusions: to the exact degree that *Shadrach* is a work of science fiction (and it is very much a work of sf) it is lessened as a novel; and, secondly, and even more pessimistically, it is probably as good as a science fiction novel can ever be and still clearly be science fiction... and, judging it at the highest literary standards, it may not be quite enough. *Shadrach* has much to tell us, but it still has far less than *Bullett Park* or *Revolutionary Road* or *Franny and Zooey* or *The Invisible Man.* Or, for that matter, *The Deer Park.* Its conclusions, its vision could only be absolute if this were 2012 and the world ruled by the great Khan, and it is not, it is not, and I venture to say that it will never be.

I don't know if there is any solution to this, and I do not wish to seem ungrateful. The trouble with being this good — and Silverberg is all of that and better — is that you open up questions, expose limitations which all the Rissa's of all the thousand worlds in all of their struggles to recapture Earth could never glimpse.

Legitimization at best, decadence at worst is fully upon us: within the last two years and in the year or so ahead we will have had delivered unto us at least thirty books about science fiction, some of them written by our old charlatans; others from outsiders moving in. Books on science fiction art, bibliographic indexes, histories of science fiction, God help us a promised *Who's Who In Science Fiction* (who *is* who in science fiction anyway?). Books which range from the admirable Gunn to the execrable Tuck, from the energetic Aldiss to the perfunctory del Rey and more yet to come. At the time the work is over the scholarship begins goes the old academic cliche (or if it does not, it should), but there is no reason to be unduly bitter about this; these books can only expand the audience for the field and finally, finally — not a moment too soon say I — the spate has produced a book of genuine, enduring value in Bowker/Barron's *Anatomy Of Wonder.*

The book is the fourth in a series of bibliographic guides (ominously the first three concern "cities," "cooking for entertain-

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ing" and "progressivism and muckraking;" does Bowker see interrelationships beyond ordinary human ken?) intended for librarians unfamiliar with subjects of recent popular interest. Aside from the implications this intent has upon the probable competence of librarians everywhere, this classification cheapens the book, which is far more than a handy pony for the MLS to ride straight to the appropriations committee. It is a work of genuine scholarship.

Divided into five major sections with appendix material (the core collection, lists of awards, other bibliographic and critical materials available), this book attempts in introductory essays and hundreds of hundred-word individual synopses to provide an overview of science fiction. The contributors have done such a notable task that they are entitled to individual citation: Robert M. Philmus for his concise essay on the field from antiquity through 1870 (he covers all the ground Aldiss did in one-twentieth the length and brilliantly), Ivor A. Rogers for a fine controversial essay on the Gernsback era, the redoubtable Thomas Clareson on the scientific romance, Joe de Bolt and John R. Pfeiffer who have put together the heart of the book in their "modern period, 1938-1975" and Francis J. Molson for probably the first comprehensive overview of the neglected but important subgenre, the juvenile novel. Not everyone is quite as good as everyone else and internal contradictions — Rogers takes a far less sanguine view of this field than do de Bolt/Pfeiffer — set up fascinating arguments which are necessarily unresolved, but no one here is less than a competent writer; and, incredibly for academic people writing about a popular field, all of them know what they are talking about and talk about it with love.

It is the individual synopses with which I am particularly taken here. The test of any reportage, any nonfiction, of course, is to check it against your own expertise or first hand knowledge, and I find the synopses of my own works to be dead-on, penetrating, critically fair and completely faithful. *Beyond Apollo, Falling Astronauts, Destruction of the Temple, Herovit's World, Gather In the Hall of the Planets, Dwellers of the Deep* and two early collections are covered here, and somehow not only the central plots but critical assessments have been compressed into less than a hundred words apiece and they are *legitimate*. De Bolt and Pfeiffer (presumably those who wrote the overall essays for each section also did all the synopses within) understand *Beyond Apollo*, they have figured out the plot (often I cannot) of *Destruction of the*

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Temple, they have seen (as few have) the clear line which runs from the two early Ace fan novels to *Herovit's World.* They are, in short, people to be trusted, as are all of the contributors, and the individual synopses are a revelation.

Of course part of the fun of a book like this — and this is a mark of respect — is to cavil, to play the I - would - have - done - it - this - way - instead - of - that - game, and there is many a good argument here. Why six works of E.E. Smith and five of Heinlein in the core collection of barely a hundred works while only one of Kornbluth and Spinrad? Why are *Dying Inside* and *A Time of Changes* in the core collection when evidently *The World Inside* or *Nightwings* are broader, more ambitious works? Don't the synopsizers make too much of Brunner's work in general and Zelazny's *Lord of Light* in particular while minimizing the brilliance and importance of Bester's two short story collections? Aren't some of the synopses — such as *The Mote in God's Eye* — opinionated past necessity while others which cry for a little less objectivity — Damon Knight is a particular victim here — minimize the contribution by failing to come to terms with it? Why only one Effinger citation (the weak *What Entropy Means To Me*) while two mature-and superior works were published shortly thereafter?

Also niggling, smaller errors: some paperback editions not noted, too much of an emphasis (for an American market) on British editions and prices. Niggling, all of this, niggling. I could not have done — granted the best collaborators, the best editing available — one half of the job which Barron has done, and as a summary of the field at the golden anniversary of its existence as a subgenre this is a book which, I suspect, will assume only greater importance in time and will probably last as long as the best of the works which it limns therein.

We're pretty lucky, all of us, to have a book like this. We're even pretty lucky considering where we came from and why to have the field altogether, much less work like *Shadrach* which is its legitimate creation. In fact, we're probably pretty lucky to have *Rissa* too, to have a field which can encompass *Shadrach* and *Rissa* in the same review to the discomfiture of no one, least of all the writers.

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The television time marketplace was a seller's market, even if the sponsor's name was God . . .

But First These Words

by ROBERT BLOCH

On the morning of January 5th, 1976, at precisely 10:18 a.m., a man named Charlie Starkweather received a visit from God Almighty.

Since Charlie happened to be one of the senior copywriters with the prestigious advertising agency of Pierce, Thrust, Hack and Clobber, Inc., God had a hell of a time getting in.

You just don't show up at a top Madison Avenue office without an appointment and expect to get past the receptionist unless you can flash an ID. So right away there was a problem. In an age where everyone is expected to carry a driver's license, a Social Security card and a plastic wallet filled with an assortment of plastic credit cards, God was at a disadvantage: He didn't even have a valid birth certificate. Painful experience had taught Him not to announce Himself by name — He'd merely be dismissed as a religious fanatic.

Nor would more spectacular methods serve as they had in the past. Descending in a fiery cloud or appearing in a burning bush would only result in trouble with the fire department.

So, in the end, the only way to slip past Security was to go right into Charlie Starkweather's head, and that was a mighty uncomfortable place to be on this, the first workday of the New Year.

To begin with, Charlie's head was throbbing with the effects of a post-holiday hangover, built up by long weeks of partying. It was also infiltrated by painful twinges of envy and self-pity, owing to the fact that Charlie was the sole senior copywriter actually on duty at the office today.

Ordinarily, the Almighty would have avoided Charlie's head like the plague — and nobody knew more about plagues than He did, having started so many of them —

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but this time there was no help for it. He had to give Charlie the message.

Charlie was standing at the water cooler when He arrived, trying to convey the contents of a paper cup to his lips with trembling fingers and irrigating his fly in the process.

"God!" said Charlie.

"Speaking," said the voice in Charlie's head. "And I've got a word for you."

"Why me?" Charlie groaned, dropping the cup.

"Because you believe. If you only knew the time I've had trying to find somebody in the business who still believes!"

Charlie listened, nodding sympathetically from time to time as the voice explained.

"It's the First Commandment," He said. "You remember — *Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*"

"I don't," Charlie murmured.

"But your boss does, and so do the account execs. They worship Mammon. I tried to get into the heads of the FCC, but they're too thick. And nobody can reach your clients; they're always in conference. That leaves you."

"Leaves me where?"

"Here. Listening to me. The time has come to do something about television."

"Why?"

"Because of the Second Commandment. *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor serve them* —"

"Please. You're shouting in my ear."

"Sorry. But you do see the problem, don't you? All these little boxes in darkened rooms all over the earth. Graven images enshrined in every home, with billions of people sitting silently before them, worshiping —"

"People don't worship television. They just watch it."

"And believe what they see. Belief is what leads to worship. Worship of athletes, worship of stars, worship of talk-show hosts. Not heavenly hosts, mind you, but characters like Johnny Carson and Merv Griffin!"

"You're shouting again."

"You're Me-damned right I am. It's about time somebody shouted. And it's reaching the point where the belief itself is getting worse than the worship. Because people have come to accept television messages as gospel. Even those commercials you write —"

"But that's my job. What can I do about it?"

God told him.

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"It won't work." Charlie shook his head and God winced.

"Try," He said. "Now here's what I want you to do."

In the end Charlie staggered back to his desk, sat down before his typewriter, and did it.

Then he took the results in to Mr. Hack. His other bosses, Pierce, Thrust and Clobber, were on location at a luxury hotel in the Bahamas with a crew of twenty, including six gorgeous models who were part of a $200,000 assignment to photograph a thirty-second commercial spot about peanut butter. Mr. Hack, knowing what his partners were up to — and, most probably, into — was in a foul mood. He glared at the piece of paper which Charlie placed on his desk.

"What's this?"

"Little copy synopsis I turned out."

"Who's the client?"

"No client. Sort of a model for a new slant we might use. I've been thinking —"

"You're being paid to write, not to think."

"But it's a new approach. It could revolutionize the whole business."

"Revolutionize? That's Communist talk!"

"Nothing like that, I swear it. If you'll only read —"

"Okay, Starkweather." Mr. Hack sighed, picked up the paper and scanned it, moving his lips.

Charlie's synopsis was simple. It read as follows:

Mexico City. A hot day in the year 1519. Under the blazing sun a throng of Aztecs gather around the base of a teocalli pyramid. Admist the thunder of drums and the squealing of flutes, the feather-clad priests drag a captive up the stone steps to the alter of sacrifice. As they press their victim down upon the slab, the high priest moves forward, grasping an obsidian knife. The knife is raised — the priest starts to drive it down — then winces, flings it aside, and clutches his shoulder.

One of the other priests looks up and murmurs, "What's the matter — arthritis pain bothering you again?"

The high priest nods — the other priest goes into his pitch — offers him the sponsor's product in a glass of tequila — the high priest drinks — smiles — picks up the knife — rips the victim open — plucks out his heart — thrusts it toward CAMERA — and says, "Give to the United Heart Foundation."

Mr. Hack looked up. "Where the hell did you get an idea like this?" He scowled. "Jesus Christ —"

"You're close," Charlie said. "There's a danger that people are

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taking the commercials too seriously. We've got to change that while there's still time. A touch of humor — don't you see —"

But Mr. Hack didn't see. He kicked Charlie Starkweather out on his assignment.

On the evening of February 27th, 1980, Fred and Myrna Hoober were watching *Ah Fong Goo*, an ethnic detective series featuring a Chinese private eye with a new slant on criminal investigation.

During Fred's first beer there was a thrilling chase sequence through the Grand Canyon which wiped out six cars, three dune buggies and a burro. Midway in Fred's second beer the hero went down to the harbor to interrogate the villain. Fred guessed it was the villain, because he had a yacht. As usual, the villain played it cool.

"Okay, so I did wear a Santa Claus suit at the playground," he said. "But that doesn't necessarily prove I'm a child molester."

Fred had finished his second beer and was just reaching for his third when the image faded and a suave announcer's voice informed him that the program would be continued after this important paid political message from Milo T. Snodgrass, candidate for United States Senator.

Gulping his beer, Fred listened to Mr. Snodgrass's assurances that, if elected, he would cut government spending, provide millions of new jobs through federal funding, eliminate crime, liberalize gun-control laws, fight pollution, encourage car sales by lowering automobile emission standards, crack down on monopolies, do away with antitrust suits that interfered with business —

Suddenly another voice interrupted the candidate.

"Repent!" it said. "Repent, ye miserable sinners, for the time is at hand. The day of judgment cometh —"

Onscreen, the candidate goggled.

Offscreen, Fred Hoober gargled into his beer. "Huh? What's that?"

"Must be getting interference from another channel," said Myrna. "Maybe Billy Graham —"

She reached out and switched to another station. Luckily, it was showing the 89th rerun of an old *Lucy* show. They settled down to watch it and Fred opened another beer.

Lucy, in an attempt to discourage prospective buyers of her house by convincing them there was a termite problem, came out as a giant ant. She opened her mouth to speak, and over her lines a voice murmured something that sounded like, "Oh, ye of little faith."

But Fred was belching and didn't hear it.

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After that, the voice was silent.

During the afternoon of March 9th, 1983, the President of the United States and his principal advisors were holding an emergency summit meeting in a sand trap at the fifth hole of the Clammy Palm Desert Golf Course.

"It's one hell of a problem, Mr. President," said the Secretary of State. "What are you going to do?"

The President shook his head. "I don't know. I was thinking of using my four iron —"

"I'm not talking about the next shot," said the secretary. "It's the condition of the nation I'm worried about."

"Forget it." The President frowned. "I didn't drag a staff of ninety people clear across the country in Air Force One just to discuss national affairs. I've got more important matters to consider." He studied his ball. "How do I lie?"

"Exactly," said the Secretary of Defense. "How *do* you lie? The population's up to a quarter of a billion, and we've got fifty million unemployed. We've already boosted welfare payments, but it doesn't mean a thing — with this galloping inflation, the dollar isn't worth a plugged nickel. Half the world is at war — with the other half. And the air is so polluted —"

"Air." The President nodded quickly. "That's your answer. "Trouble with you fellows, you don't follow what's on the air. Well, I do." He smiled. "I was watching television just last night, waiting to see that new game show, *You Bet Your Ass*, or whatever it's called — and I accidentally switched to a news broadcast. This guy, one of the biggest commentators on the networks, was saying as how the real trouble is all in our minds, just negative thinking. Instead of griping about what's wrong with the world, we should remember what's right."

"But he's only a news commentator —"

"What do you mean, *only*?" said the President. "Who knows more about the news than a commentator? That's his business, to tell us what's really going on. And this man is an expert — why, he earns more a year than I do!"

Off in the distant desert a pillar of fire suddenly started to form and flicker, but the smog was so thick that nobody noticed. And when the President swung,sliced, and started to curse, no one heard the voice crying out in the wilderness.

On the night of April 30th, 1986, Finnegan's Bar And Grill was crowded. But then it was always crowded and so was everyplace else.

No one was in the grill — that part of the operation had been closed for months because of the

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food shortage — but the bar area was decorated with wall-to-wall people. Not your upwardly mobile elitist types, but plain, ordinary folks who appreciated the informal atmosphere of a genuine replica of an old-fashioned tavern, an authentic imitation of a corner barroom located on the eighty-second floor of a brand-new high-rise savings and loan building.

Some customers were drinking, some were smoking, some were sniffing, some were mainlining, and a few die-hards were just crouching in the corners under the air-conditioning vents, trying to inhale a breath of fresh, clean recycled smog.

But everyone was here for a good time, and a little crowding didn't matter. Sure, ten grand was a steep price to pay for a shot and a chaser, but the alcohol killed the germs in the water, and if you didn't drink you could always turn on.

Turn on the transistor radios and hear that new rock group, the Dow-Jones Industrials, getting into their big platinum-record hit, *Up the Creek without A Snorkel.*

Turn on the TV to the educational channel and watch the Triple-X-Rated Movie Of The Week, *King Kong Meets Deep Throat.*

Sure, there were a few ripoffs, several muggings, an occasional gang rape, and a couple of teenies who cornered an old man in the washroom and flushed him to death. But like the announcer was saying on the government commercial that interrupted the movie, sex and violence were under control. The bulk of the customers here were just like the everyday crowd at —

"The Tower of Babel!"

The voice rising above the din was almost audible, but only for a moment. Because somebody had just opened a window, and now all you could hear was street noise — cars crashing, ambulance sirens wailing, home-made bombs exploding, rioters screaming, and the drone of police fighter planes overhead. After all, it *was* Saturday night.

"Generation of vipers," said the voice, talking to Itself. "This time no Flood, no Ark, no Noah — I swear it! Now where did I stockpile those thunderbolts —?"

The world ended on May 17th, 1988. But the Lakers were playing an important game, and nobody even noticed.

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The scene of this new Willy Newbury story is an old chateau in France, which turns out to be disturbed by some ghostly doings that inevitably involve the banker and his wife Denise.

The Menhir

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

Coming down the stairs after breakfast, I passed the beautiful countess. She said, *"Bonjour,* Monsieur Newbury. Did you sleep well?"

"Parfaitement, merci," I said.

"Did you hear any sounds in the night?"

"No, Madame. Should I have?"

She shrugged. "I just asked myself. This old château is full of strange knocks and creaks. Some of our guests are disturbed, although I am sure that the causes are natural."

"I shall watch for such phenomena, Madame. They will not intimidate me, I assure you, for I am not without experience in such matters."

"Good. Where did you and the little Denise go yesterday? You returned late."

"We walked around the city wall at Vannes and then took the boat ride around the Golfe du Morbihan."

"That is much for one day."

"It is the truth, Madame, but our time is limited. That is without doubt why we slept ourselves so profoundly."

"Where are you going today?" she asked. The Comtesse de la Carrière was a strikingly handsome woman in her early thirties. She forewent make-up, not needing it.

"We thought we should go to Hennebont. One says that there is a fine medieval gate and rampart."

The comtesse made a slight grimace. "Certainly! But we, our memories of it are not of the most agreeable."

"Ainsi donc?"

"We were there, my sister and I, at the time of the massacre."

"Oh? I read of that in the guide."

"It is not exaggerated. Before the Germans left, on the seventh August, 1944, they went to the houses, knocked on the doors, and

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shot the people as they came out. There were also many townspeople in the shelters, to avoid the American bombardment; but the Germans went there, too, and shot them. Angèle — she was a little girl then, you know — would have been killed, but the young German lieutenant, who commanded the platoon that was shooting the others, whispered to her to run. Thus she survived. Have you made the tour of the megaliths?"

"We saw the *alignements* of Carnac the day before yesterday. We thought that this afternoon, if we get back in good time, we might continue on to Locmariaquer to see the big menhir and the dolmen."

"Well, if you do not have the time to go so far, you can see our private menhir, on a piece of our land one kilometer away on the Quiberon road. This Menhir of Locmelon is broken, like that at Locmariaquer. It was complete until the war, when an explosion knocked it over. We say the Germans blew it up to show their Aryan superiority; they say it was a bomb from an American airplane, hunting for Lorient or St. Nazaire. The year past, the members of an English cult came here to march around the remains in long robes, carrying candles. They said they were Druids."

"If I understand my archaeology, these huge stones were erected long before the Celts and their Druid priests arrived."

"You have reason, Monsieur, but you know how people love to believe fairytales. Anyway, *bonne chance.*"

I have traveled enough not to be impressed by titles — especially French titles, since in that country any citizen may call himself by any title he pleases. If Jacques Leblanc wants to call himself the Grand Khan of Tatary, he may do so.

Still, it was nice to get on the good side of our titled landlord and landlady at the Château Kerzeriolet. Denise and I had seen only glimpses of them during the first few days of our stay. I suspect that a gaffe we pulled on our first day there had something to do with this.

We had arrived from Normandy with a suitcase full of dirty clothes. The first full day we spent washing up, and we had hung the garments on an elastic laundry cord across an open window. We did not realize that this festoon was painfully visible from the courtyard, until Jean-Pierre Tanguy, the professional *hôtelier* who handled the paying guests, telephoned in great embarrassment to ask us to take them down. We were even more embarrassed than the manager.

On the fourth day, however, we ran into the Comte and Comtesse de la Carrière long enough to ex-

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change amenities. When they found that Denise was French and that I spoke the language, they thawed.

Denise had saved me from a couple of other blunders. On the first morning, for instance, I was all set to go down to breakfast, but she insisted that we stay in our room and wait for our coffee and rolls to be brought up. That was how it was done here, and we should merely gum up the works by trying to change the routine. To me, an eggless French breakfast has never seemed quite the real thing; but with all this talk of cholesterol, perhaps the French had the right idea all along.

The castellated wall at Hennebont can be seen in minutes. We could view only the outside of the great medieval gate, the Porte Broerec'h, because workmen were still repairing war damage. So we got back early and went on to Locmariaquer.

There we examined the Fairy Stone, the biggest menhir of all. When new, it must have stood sixty feet tall and have weighed over 350 tons. Archaeologists think it fell in ancient times, perhaps while being erected. The technology of those people was not quite up to handling so huge a piece.

Even so, I have always been impressed by the feats of those Neolithic peasants, in trimming, moving, and upending huge monumental stones, as at Stonehenge and Carnac. I was not, however, so awed as to think they had called in little green men from Venus to help them.

Anyway, the stone has been lying down as far back as recorded history goes. It had broken into five pieces, of which four still lie where they fell. We also examined the big dolmen called the Merchant's Table nearby. It was once a grave mound, with slabs of stone on the sides and top; but treasure hunters and erosion had removed the dirt, leaving the slabs standing. A tunnel runs from beneath the dolmen under the Fairy Stone.

We had meant to take pictures of each other sitting on the remains of the Fairy Stone, but the fickle weather was overcast and hazy, with an occasional drizzle. I took a few snaps without hope of getting first-class photographs. Then, on the way back to Kerzeriolet, the sky cleared just as we approached the field where, the comtesse said, their private Menhir of Locmelon had stood.

Following her directions, we parked and hiked across the grassy countryside until we found the stone. It was not in the same class with the Fairy Stone, having been ten or twelve feet tall. It, too, had been broken, into three large and several small pieces.

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"It wouldn't be much of a job to glue it back together," I said.

"*Mon petit construteur!*" said Denise. "Willy, you should have stayed with your engineering instead of becoming a banker. But you know, darling, in all these old countries, they have so many relics that it is all the governments can do to patch them up as fast as they fall apart. Besides, there would be a lot of rules by some Department of Archaeology to comply with. You would have to fill out forms in quadruplicate and file applications."

"God deliver me from European red tape!" I said. "Our own kind is bad enough. Anyway, I wasn't thinking of doing the job myself." I focused my camera on one of the fragments. "Looks as if this part had been carved into a face. Sinister-looking old coot, isn't he?"

"Have a care, my old. The spirit of the old coot might be offended."

"After some of the things I've seen, he doesn't scare me at all."

"Be careful anyway. Remember our poor children back home!"

Back at the château, we ran into the comtesse in the lower hall. I told her of seeing the Menhir of Locmelon.

"He wants to put it back together, Madame," said Denise. "He is one of those who, on seeing anything broken, at once wishes to repair it."

"Such a man must be useful around the house," said the comtesse. "That my Henri had more of that knack! He cannot drive a nail — ah, there you are, Henri. You know the Monsieur and Madame Newbury, is it not?"

The comte was a slender, balding man of about my age — that is, a little past forty. If Hollywood had been looking for an actor and an actress to play a refined, ultra-gracious couple from the old European aristocracy, they could hardly have chosen better than these two.

The comte bowed lightly and shook my hand. "*Enchanté de toute manière, mes amis.* Will you do me the honor to take an *apéritif* with us before dinner?"

We went into the Carrières' private parlor and sipped vermouth. The comtesse's younger sister, Angèle de Kervadec, and another man joined us. Angèle looked like her sister but was even more beautiful. When she got older and put on a little weight, she would be a virtual double of Thérèse, Comtesse de la Carriere.

Her companion was a burly fellow of my generation, with a close-cut black beard showing its first few threads of gray. He was introduced as Max Burgdorf, of Zürich. Although a German Swiss, his French had only the slightest trace of German accent. He said little, but when he did speak, it was in a

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stiff, abrupt manner. As he sat on the arm of Angèle's chair, she leaned against him. There was evidently some understanding between them.

The comtesse brought up the matter of reassembling the Menhir of Locmelon. The comte said, "Ah, Monsieur, that would cost money. Money is a problem here, with the franc in its present deplorable condition. One struggles to hold this place by every means. With taxes and inflation what they are, one must make every economy. Perhaps when De Gaulle comes to power.... But meanwhile, one must be realistic. Perhaps you, as a man of finance, can advise us."

"I am desolated that I do not know enough about French laws and financial institutions," I said. "Otherwise I should be happy to do so."

The comte's face fell just a trifle, although he was too well-bred to say anything. Having been through this sort of thing before, I knew that we were being cultivated not for our charm but for some sure-fire free financial tips. I continued:

"But I do not think the reërection of the menhir would be very costly. Monsieur Lebraz's garage in Vannes has a fine new wrecking truck with a crane in the back."

"The way those idiots drive," said the comte, "Lebraz has plenty of business." To his wife he said, "Perhaps we should be in the garage business, *hein?* in lieu of trying to maintain this relic."

When the dinner bell chimed, Denise and I rose. The comtesse said, "Some night soon, we shall have one of Angèle's seances. You must attend."

After we had gone to bed, I was jerked awake by the sound of footsteps in the hall. Not that there was anything unusual in that; there were a dozen other paying guests in the château. These footsteps, however, continued back and forth, back and forth. The sound brought Denise up, too.

"Now what?" I said. "Monsieur Burgdorf working up courage to visit the fair Angèle?"

"Tais toi!" she said, punching me in the ribs. "Nothing so vulgar here. These people are too careful of their blue blood, and you are just a dirty middle-aged man."

The footsteps stopped, and three raps sounded against our door. I sat up on the side of the bed. As a native of the crime-ridden United States, I did not rush to open the door. Instead, I called: "Who is there?"

For answer, the three raps sounded again.

"I think you can open," said Denise. "This French countryside is very law-abiding."

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"Just a minute," I said. I got the family blackjack out of our luggage, stepped to the door, shot back the bolt, and jerked the door open. No one was there.

It took us over an hour to get to sleep after that. In any case, we heard no more odd noises.

Next day we left early, drove the Peugeot to Vannes, and continued on around the shores of the Golfe du Morbihan. This brought us out on the Rhuys Peninsula. Here, near Sarzeau and overlooking the Golfe, the guidebook said there was a ruined medieval castle.

We found the Château Morzon, a scruffy-looking pile rising amid the vinyards, and aroused the keeper. This was a Monsieur Le Goff, a stocky, weather-beaten old gent with a huge gray mustache. When we had paid our twenty francs, he showed us around, explaining:

"...in that tower, Monsieur and Madame, one says that the wife of the Duc Jean was imprisoned. And on the wall east of the tower, where we are now going to mount, one says that, on moonlit nights, a ghost in armor walks. Me, I am not superstitious, but those legends are good for the tourism, eh? Some say it is the ghost of the Duc Alain Barbe-Torte; others, the ghost of our great Breton hero, Bertrand du Guesclin — *prenez garde!*"

We were climbing the stair that led up to the surviving curtain wall. I was on the outer side, abreast of the keeper, while Denise followed. At one step, the outermost stone of the tread gave way as I put my weight upon it. It skittered off the stair, leaving me with one foot on the staircase and the other over empty air.

Monsieur Le Goff caught the sleeve of my coat. Denise shrieked "Willy!" and seized the part of my garments nearest to her, which happened to be the seat of my pants. Between their pull and a desperate windmilling of my own arms, I barely avoided a thirty-foot fall to the grass-grown courtyard below. The errant stone hit with a crash.

"Ah, quel malheur!" cried the keeper. "But by the grace of the good God, Monsieur, you are still with us. I must have that stone cemented back into place. You know how it is. With an old ruin like this, it crumbles faster than one can repair it. Are you all right now?"

We continued our tour. At the end, I pressed upon Monsieur Le Goff a whole fistful of that crummy paper the French then used for money. I figured it was the least I could do. On the way home, Denise said:

"I warned you about making fun of the sinister old coot. I am not altogether joking."

* * *

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Back at the château, Denise took a nap while I prowled the grounds with my camera, taking advantage of one of our few periods of bright sunshine. I came upon the comte, in old pants and rolled-up shirt sleeves, working on the flower gardens with trowel, watering pot, and insecticide spray. We passed the time of day, and I told of my visit to the Château Morzon.

"Have you a family ghost?" I asked, "as the keeper at Morzon said they have there, if one believes the stories?"

"No, not family, anyway. Why do you ask?"

I told about the knocks during the previous night. The comte gave the ghost of a smile.

"There is no old tradition of a specter here," he said. "But then, this house is not really old. It is not medieval or even Renaissance. It is Napoleonic, as you have doubtless inferred. It was built around 1805, to replace the original castle, destroyed in the Revolution of 1789.

"On the other hand, I will confess that, since the last war, there have been certain — ah — psychic manifestations. My wife tells me that you know something of these matters."

"I have had some strange experiences, yes."

"Then, are you and the charming Madame Newbury free tonight?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Comte."

"*Bien,* would you do us the honor of attending our little seance? Perhaps you can explain certain things. We begin at twenty-one hours."

"Thank you; we shall be enchanted. But how do you proceed? With a planchette, or tipping a table, or trance mediumship?"

"Angèle is our psychic. She does automatic writing."

"Oh? That will be very interesting. Tell me, does she have an understanding with that man — Monsieur — ah — Burgdorf?"

"Yes, one might say so. Their formal engagement will be announced when Max has his French citizenship."

"He intends to become French?"

"If he wishes to attach himself to my family, he must. You see, Monsieur — how shall I explain? Madame Newbury and you, have you children?"

"Three. They are in America, with my parents."

"Ah, how fortunate you are! Thérèse and I, although we have been married for twelve years, have none. It is not for lack of desire, but the physicians tells us we never shall. I have no close relatives — or, rather, those I had were killed in the war. So, when I die, the title will become extinct, unless I make provisions for passing it on."

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"Can you do that legally?"

"Yes, if one is willing to go through enough administrative routine. Of course," he smiled, "I realize that you Americans are all staunch republicans, to whom any titles are medieval nonsense. But, still, a title is a nice thing to have. Aside from its sentimental appeal, it lends a certain solidarity to the family. It is even good for business.

"So, I have determined to bequeath this title to Angèle's husband, when she has one, to be passed on to their heirs. But, naturally, the husband must be French. Then Max, wishing to marry Angèle, must become French."

The séance assembled at nine. We — the comte and comtesse, Angèle, Max Burgdorf, Denise and I, and a younger man whom we had not met before, sat in a circle around a big table. The lights were turned down. Angèle held a pencil and a pad on a clip board.

The young man was introduced as Frédéric Dion, a family friend from Vannes. He was a blond youth of about Angèle's age, who watched Angèle with an intentness that did not seem to me called for.

After a while, Angèle leaned forward and began to write. She stared straight ahead without looking at the paper. When she stopped, the comte got up and peered over her shoulder.

"The Old French again?" murmured the comtesse.

"No, this time it is Breton. Do you read it, Frédéric?"

Dion shook his head. "They had not yet introduced classes in Breton when I attended school."

The comtesse said, "Jean-Pierre would know. I will go for him."

While she was out, the comte said to me: "Monsieur Tanguy is a fanatical Breton nationalist. He does not altogether approve of us, because our family in this area goes back only to the fifteenth century. Therefore we are, in his view, foreigners."

The comtesse returned with the manager. Tanguy looked at Angèle's scribble, shook his head, and frowned. "This is a more archaic dialect than I am accustomed to. But let me see — I think it says: 'Restore my house, if you know what is good for you. Restore my house. Restore my house.' Then it trails off into an illegible scrawl."

"My faith!" said the comte. "Does he expect me to tear down this *baraque* and rebuild the original castle?"

"Even if we could afford it," added the comtesse, "we do not have any accurate plan. There is nothing in existence to tell how it looked, save that engraving by Fragonard."

"Has this — ah — personality a name?" I asked.

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"Sometimes he calls himself Ogmas; sometimes, Blaise," said the comte.

"Could they be two separate entities?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? But he insists that both names belong to the same being."

"Perhaps one is a given name and the other a surname," said Dion.

"But," I said, "what species does this entity belong to? Is it the ghost of a mortal man, or is it some pagan godlet, left over from the Age of Bronze?"

"We have asked him," said the comtesse, "but he gives only ambiguities or nonsense in response. Such inquiries seem to enrage him."

The comte added: "The *curé* insists that it is a demon from Hell, and that we are in danger of damnation for having to do with it." He smiled indulgently. "The good Father Paré is, I fear, a little behind the times. He has never reconciled himself to the changes that are taking place in the Church."

We waited a while, but Angèle produced no more spirit writing.

That night, however, there were more ghostly footsteps in the halls and knockings on doors. In the morning, four of the comte's paying guests left ahead of schedule. They had been kept awake all night, they said, and at their age they needed their sleep. Although they did not admit to being frightened, I have no doubt they were.

The Carrières looked worried. The comte said to me: "We are, as you would say, skating on the thin ice, financially speaking. A bad season could ruin us."

We spent most of that day in Auray, taking pictures of old houses and streets. We saw the monument to the Comte de Chambord, the royalist pretender of the 1870s, and the house where Benjamin Franklin stayed in 1778. In the evening, we had another séance. The same group sat around the table.

When Angèle began to write, she first produced a medieval Breton scrawl that not even Jean-Pierre Tanguy could read. Then the writing broke into clear French. *"Vengeance!"* it said. *"Vengeance! Vengeance!"*

"Vengeance on whom?" asked the comte to the empty air.

"On him who destroyed my house," said Angèle's writing.

"My dear spirit," said the comte, "the castle was destroyed in 1795, at the time of the disaster of Quiberon. All those who took part in that vandalism are long dead. So how could one take vengeance on them?"

"Not this house. My house. My house of stone. My great stone."

"Stone?" said the comtesse.

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"Do you by chance mean the Menhir of Locmelon?"

"Yes. Yes. Restore my house. Take vengeance on those who overthrew it. Vengeance! Vengeance!"

The comte ran puzzled eyes around the circle, lingering for a fraction of a second on me and on Max Burgdorf. "Who, then, destroyed your stone?"

"Barbarians. Barbarians did it."

"Barbarians? My good phantom, the last barbarians we had here were the Vikings, chased out by Alain Barbe-Torte in the year 939."

"Not true. Barbarians here, now."

"Hm," said the comte. "He must mean the destruction of the menhir in the late war. We French say the Germans did it, while the Germans say the Americans did it. We have no Germans here. Monsieur Newbury, were you by chance in the American Air Force?"

"No, Monsieur, I was not. I was in the army, but I had a desk job and never got near Brittany."

"You see, Monsieur *revenant,*" said the comte to the air, "nobody here could have had anything to do with the unfortunate overthrow of your megalith."

"Not so. Two barbarians here. One in army that did it. Vengeance on him. Vengeance coming. You shall see...."

Angèle broke into a frenzy of scribbling. The tension in the darkened room rose to a silent scream. The comte said:

"But, my dear ghost, I have explained —"

"No," wrote Angèle. "One barbarian army missed my house; one hit it. I know which is which."

"Excuse me one moment," said Max Burgdorf. He got up and quietly left the room.

"Well, then," said the comte, "which *is* which?"

The spirit writing went off into a sputter of illegible Dark Age Breton. Then the top sheet of Angèle's pad was used up. The comte reached over her shoulder and tore off the sheet. Angèle began writing again.

"You have wrong," wrote Angèle. "Man with beard was in barbarian army. He shall die. Other barbarian warned. Warned yesterday, at Morzon. He shall help with [illegible]."

"But this —" began the comte. He broke off, turned his head, and listened. There were footsteps outside in the hall. Saying "Pardon me one moment, please," the comte rose, went to the door, and opened it. The rest of us, except Angèle, got up and followed him.

Max Burgdorf, suitcase in hand, was opening the huge carved front door of the château. The comte said sharply:

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"Max! What are you doing? Where are you going so suddenly?"

"That is my affair," said Burgdorf.

"Oh, no, it is not! Are you leaving us, then?"

"I am."

"But why? Where are you going? What of Angèle?"

The comte caught Burgdorf's arm just as the man was going out the door and turned him around. Burgdorf shook off the detaining hand.

"I warn you, do not try to stop me!" he said.

The comte persisted: "Max! As a man of honor, I demand an explanation —"

"You will learn in due course," snapped Burgdorf over his shoulder, striding out towards his car.

Just then another car drove into the courtyard, and four men piled out. Three wore the khaki of the local police and carried guns of various kinds. The fourth, in civilian clothes, shouted, *"Halte-là,* Monsieur von Zeitz!"

Burgdorf wheeled, drawing a revolver. Before he could shoot, a rifle cracked. The revolver spun away, and Burgdorf, dropping his suitcase, grasped his arm with a yelp of pain.

"Helmuth von Zeitz, alias Max Burgdorf," said the man in civilian clothes, "I arrest you in the name of the Republic!"

Burgdorf — or von Zeitz — offered no more resistance. The comte said, "Monsieur the Commissionnaire, I pray you, have the goodness to explain!"

"Monsieur le Comte," said the official, "this man is wanted for war crimes. He was the officer commanding the S.S. detachment, assigned to the massacre of Hennebont. I cannot imagine why the fool returned to the scene of his crime, but that is the fact. His application for citizenship betrayed him, when the naturalization bureau investigated it."

Angèle, who had quietly appeared in the doorway, gave a shriek. "It is him! I know him now, in spite of the beard! He is the one who saved my life!"

"While depriving hundreds of our compatriots of theirs," said the comte. In the light of the lamps flanking the entrance, the comte looked suddenly older and grim.

Burgdorf-von Zeitz cried out: "I meant to make it up to you, Angèle! I did not mean to do it! I was only a junior officer, following orders! When you ran away, a little twelve-year-old girl, I told myself, I must come back some day and —" Tears on his cheeks shone in the lamplight.

"Come along, Monsieur," said the commissionnaire. "We must get you to the hospital, to repair that broken arm. It would not do to

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have you sneeze into the basket with your arm in a sling."

They hustled the suspect into the car and roared off. Angèle burst into tears. Frédéric Dion put his arms around her.

When the police car had gone, we straggled back into the château. Angèle disappeared with her sister. I asked the comte:

"What will they do to him?"

The comte looked at me with a slight smile and brought the edge of his palm sharply against his neck. The French are not a sentimental folk.

For the next half hour, the comte and Tanguy were busy reassuring the other guests, who had popped out of their rooms at the shot. At last we gathered again in the parlor — the comte, Tanguy, Dion, Denise, and I. The comte poured brandy all around. He said:

"Let us thank *le bon Dieu* that it was not worse and that it is now over."

"Oh," said Denise, "are you sure that it is, Monsieur le Comte? Your Blaise de Ogmas, or whatever he calls himself, still demands the restoration of his menhir. Otherwise...."

"I understand," said the comte. "This calls for thought."

"Henri," said Frédéric Dion, "you are aware that Angèle and I are old friends, and that before this self-styled Swiss appeared, she was inclined to me. Have I your permission to pay my addresses to her again?"

"To a sure blow — but wait an instant. The specter wishes his menhir restored, or he will ruin us by driving away our guests with knocks and rattles. So, if you will share equally with me the cost of re-erecting the megalith, you may pay court to Angèle with my blessing. As for Monsieur Newbury, I am sure that you, Monsieur, will, for the sake of the ancient friendship between our countries, donate to the project your engineering skill. Are we in accord? *Bien.*"

The comte might be a charming fellow, but that did not stop him from keeping a sharp French eye on his own interest.

I don't know how Frédéric Dion made out with his suit. He seemed a nice young man, and so I hope he married Angèle and lived with her happily ever after.

But that is how, a week later, we were all standing in our rough clothes in the field of the Menhir of Locmelon, watching the crane on the back of Monsieur Lebraz' wrecking truck slowly hoist the last piece of the stone into the air. I had placed the cable around the fragment, hoping that nobody would notice my inexperience as a rigger.

When this piece was poised over the monument, I climbed the lad-

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der. Denise handed me up a trowel and a bucket, and I slathered mortar on the broken surface of the stone. Then Lebraz lowered the topmost fragment, a centimeter at a time, until I could guide it into place. We pulled the cable out from between the stones. Surplus mortar was squeezed out of the joint in gobs, which I scraped off with my trowel. At last, the sinister visage carved in the top of the monolith glowered down upon us, as it had for forty centuries before its overthrow.

The next day, we packed our car to head for Cahors. Being behind schedule because of the work on the menhir, we got an early start. As we were saying good-by to the Carrières in the courtyard, a car drove up and a little fat man got out.

"Monsieur le Comte de la Carrière?" he said.

"C'est moi," said the comte.

"I am Gaston Lobideau, from the Office of Historical Monuments. I am reliably informed that you, Monsieur, without permission and without specialized archaeological knowledge, have restored the broken Menhir of Locmelon. I must warn you, sir, that this is a breach of the most serious of the laws of the Republic concerning the conservation of ancient monuments. You should have applied for permission through the appropriate channels. Then, in a few months, an expert would have come to check your qualifications for such an enterprise and to supervise the operation...."

Denise and I got into our Peugeot, waved, and drove off. When last seen, the comte and Monsieur Lobideau were shouting and waving their arms. I never heard how it came out, but perhaps that is just as well. They might have hauled us into court, too.

EPITAPH ON CERES

Here lies the body of Black McGinnity,
Freebooting pirate from out of the void,
Slain by an Amazon empress the minute he
Tried to lay hands on her asteroid.

— Sherwood Springer

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KINGS KONG AND ARTHUR, ET AL.

Forward... There are times when a critic despairs. One such is when so much verbiage has been poured on a work-to-be-reviewed that there seems little use in saying anything. And when there's nothing to say, in any case...

Once upon a time there was a little movie about a big ape (hereafter called Kong 1). Looked upon in its time as sheer, nonsense escapism, it was still representative *of* its time: artistically naive and technically expert. More or less forgotten, it reappeared with the advent of TV, and became part of a new generation's folklore.

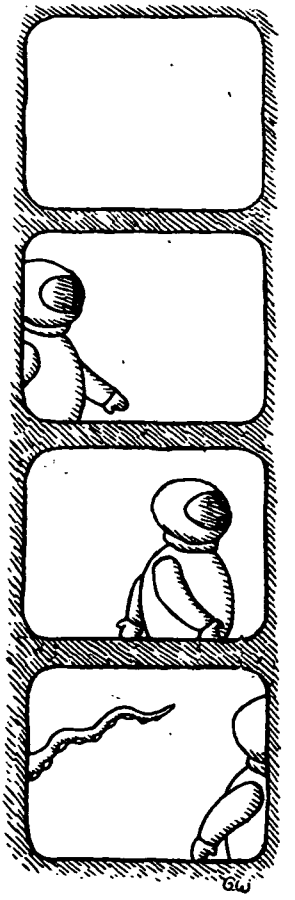
In fact it became *so* popular that a big producer decided to make a *big* movie about the big ape. His reason was to make money; not that all movies aren't, but sometimes one is remade because it might be made better, or at least more relevant to a new time.

So the little good movie was remade as a big bad movie (hereafter called Kong 2). Not that it was *rotten* — there was too much left over from the little movie for that.

But where Kong 1 was under 100 minutes long, and something exciting was always happening, Kong 2 ran 2¼ hours with lots of

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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padding and no prehistoric monsters to liven the dull moments. Where Kong 1 was obvious in the right boy's-adventure-book way, and subtle when it came to sexuality, Kong 2 was obvious in *every* way, which is great for those members of the audience given to making loud ribald remarks, but pretty ridiculous otherwise.

Kong 2 is in color and widescreen. Its effects are good. The heroine is prettier and hipper (though she doesn't scream as loud as Kong 1's). But with all the plusses and minuses, it's still, oddly enough, almost the same movie. *So what, in the name of 20 million plus dollars, was the use of remaking it?*

To get you to put up four or five bucks at the box office, instead of seeing it free on TV.

But why is it a big, *bad* movie? Because it muddies and confuses the reputation of the good, little movie. That's why.

We really didn't need it.

Three of my favorite books of all time have been T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* and its two sequels (rewritten — *not* to their advantage, I feel — and combined into the omnibus *The Once and Future King*). I was not all that happy with the Disney film of the first book, though the Disney organization has done worse hatchet jobs on literary properties, and the movie did keep some of White's wonderfully wacky use of anachronism.

I loathed the Lerner and Lowe musical, *Camelot,* revolving around the Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere triangle. As some genius critic put it, it was twice as long as *Parsifal* with half the laughs.

However, the movie *Camelot* was quite another thing entirely. I bring it up here and now because it recently had its TV premiere, and it was the enchanting film that I remembered it being.

The Broadway-tacky songs are still there (though a couple *are* better than they might be), but the script has moved appreciably closer to the original books than the stage version.

But it's in the production that *Camelot* is really magic. The sets are everybody's childhood ideas of what a *real* fairy tale castle should be. The costumes, too, have an Andrew Lang look to them, but relied less on silks and satins than on marvelously primitive looking fabrics and decorations, such as Guinevere's wedding dress, which had pumpkin seed embroidery and a fishnet overgown. Even the smallest props maintained this quality of faerie; I can think of no film so imaginatively produced.

And a word, too, for the performers. Franco Nero was much too handsome for White's ugly, tor-

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tured Lance, but David Hemmings was a marvelously slimy Mordred, Richard Harris caught Arthur's agonized need to prove the revolutionary concept that might did *not* make right, and Vanessa Redgrave's beautifully regal Jennie convinced me that she was the only person in the world that could portray Galadriel.

Late, late show dept.... Since its release in 1959, I have seen *On the Beach* a number of times, and each time it has impressed me more. A recent viewing has convinced me that this is one of the most flawless films made on a science fictional theme.

I phrase that delicately because many would not consider *On the Beach* science fiction. Nevertheless, it uses one of the oldest themes of the genre, the destruction of mankind (a theme so old, in fact, that it is almost never used anymore).

Here, because it's from a mainstream source (Nevil Shute's novel), it's given a depth seldom found in the genre. The film is enhanced by the kind of expertise that's not seen in movies these days — the most skillful of photography and writing; charismatic stars who can also act; to wit, every device in the film is carefully calculated to make its point.

At the very beginning, we learn that Australia, the last inhabited spot on Earth (due to a nuclear war), is also doomed as the radiation moves south. We follow the lives of five or six fairly ordinary people, and only every once in a while are we given a hint (sometimes just by a thrown away line) that they and their world will die in a matter of weeks.

It's a long film; the last half hour is harrowing as the streets become more and more empty and each character prepares for his/her death. No melodrama here; just a slow ending. I've never been touched by an end-of-humanity story before (which may say as much about me as it does the stories), but I must admit that by the end of *On the Beach,* I'm surrounded by soppy tissues. If mankind *must* end, I hope it's this way; with neither a bang nor a whimper, but with great dignity.

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This is Bob Leman's second story for F&SF. His first, "Bait," appeared in our January 1967 issue. Mr. Leman is a superior, if not prolific, writer, as you will see when you read this story about Stanley Scott, a 43 year old appliance repairman who lived in a trance of fear, and for good reason.

Industrial Complex

by BOB LEMAN

Stanley Scott, forty-three. Small-appliance repairman. Married, two children. Works hard, pays his taxes.

Is insane.

Or thinks he is. Thinks he's *going* crazy, anyhow. He believes impossible things. For example:

He knows that Dorothy Barr, of Dorothy's Kard Shoppe next door to his premises in the undesirable end of the shopping center, is keeping a watchful eye on him, is clocking his comings and goings and photographing everybody who enters his shop. In the wall she has installed a listening device that enables her to hear everything that goes on in the Appliance Clinic. She has, he believes, a tap on his phone.

He has told himself sometimes that this is preposterous, that he has been friendly with Dorothy Barr since she opened her shop ten years ago, that this mild and hard-working little widow is perhaps the least likely person in the state to be a spy. But then he will see her peering through her window when he arrives at work in the morning, and he knows her for what she has become. Behind the rimless glasses her eyes are flat and empty, windows into some fathomless sink of evil. Even when she smiles, even when she waves, he can see through the mousy facade to the malice and wickedness behind. He trembles when he sees her eyes.

He knows the word "paranoia," knew it before it became a fad word. He has looked it up in several reference books, reading at first with sick fear, and then with despair and horror. He was insane or going insane, there was no doubt about it. All the symptoms were there.

Except that when Dorothy Barr waved her good morning to him, he had only to look into her eyes to

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know with absolute certainty that he was not crazy at all, that Dorothy was in truth something other than what she had always seemed to be. And that, whatever she was, she was watching him with a cold reptilian patience, and making reports on him to persons (persons?) unknown.

Perhaps not altogether unknown, either. It was almost certain that their headquarters — or, more likely, their local operations center — was out at Consolidated Pipe and Tube. He did not know yet what they were up to out there, but it couldn't be doubted that they'd rank above Dorothy. When the mill was completed it would be the largest employer in town. Dorothy Barr was pretty small potatoes compared with that. But it remained an unanswered question whether the construction of the enormous plant was directed solely at him or if he was merely some sort of obstacle in the way of whatever the real purpose of the plant turned out to be.

He had, as it happened, known about the plant before he knew about Dorothy Barr. The smug story in the *Chronicle* two years ago had alerted him: "WALLBORO TO BE SITE OF MILL EMPLOYING 3000. Consolidated Pipe and Tube Corporation has completed negotiations for the purchase of a twenty-acre tract in southern Wall Township, and will immediately commence construction of a $500,000,000 steel-fabricating plant which is expected to employ between 2,500 and 3,000 workers, it was announced today by G.G. Scranton, President of Consolidated." There was a picture of Scranton shaking hands with the president of the Chamber of Commerce.

"Stanley!" his wife said. "What's the matter?" His face was contorted and his breathing was loud. He thrust the paper at her, pointing a finger at the headline.

"What about it?" she said. He had no answer. Something — the names, perhaps, or Scranton's face — had loosed a frenzy of fear within him, a flood of unreasoning and total terror. He did not know what he was afraid of, but he knew somehow that something, some horror beyond words, lay somewhere in wait.

"Drink your coffee," his wife said. "Why don't you lie down? Is your stomach upset? Oh, what's the matter?"

"I'll be all right," Stanley finally croaked. "I'd better get to the shop." There was no explanation he could offer.

For many weeks stories about the new industry were on the front page every day, and the coming prosperity was an important topic

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of conversation in the town. Every mention of it tore at Stanley with awful claws, and by the time it was no longer front-page news, he had lost weight and developed a hunted look. He went mechanically through the motions of his daily routine, moving in a trance of fear. He kept a very tight grip on himself, however; he knew that if he did not, he might crawl into bed and never come out again, or run naked down the street baying like an animal. So strong was his control that after a time he was able to force the terror to retreat into a corner of his mind, where it squatted menacingly, but left him the capacity to function. And to think.

He thought about it endlessly, resentfully contemplating his condition and seeking an escape. He was afraid; paralyzingly afraid. He did not know what he feared and indeed could discover nothing to be afraid of. Yet there had to be something, or he would not be afraid. He had to find out what it was. He had to find out who was doing this to him. And then he had to do something about it.

Any reference to Consolidated Pipe and Tube caused the squatting fear to swell ominously in its corner; it followed, then, that the enemy was either the company, or the company's Wallboro plant, or a conspiratorial group at the plant, or — very likely — G.G. Scranton himself.

At that point he always found himself unable to carry the train of thought any further; his mind simply took that for a stopping place, and declined to operate. If he persisted he was visited by an unbearable sensation of slow-motion dissolution and disintegration; bits and pieces of his mind seemed to detach themselves and, in an unhurried and stately manner, spiral away into space.

It was thus something of a relief when at last he came face-to-face with one of the enemy. He was never certain whether the confrontation was deliberate and designed to intimidate him, or whether he made the discovery against their wishes, as a consequence of his new-found ability to see through appearances and perceive even cunningly hidden reality.

She came into the shop carrying a toaster and an iron, which she thumped onto the counter. "Can you fix these?" she said. She was a small woman, perhaps in her middle forties, unobtrusively well-dressed and with an air of assurance. She spoke with a slight Southern accent.

"Well, let's see," Stanley said. He removed screws, lifted off plates, and examined interiors. He felt somewhat better when he was working. "Don't think you've been

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in before," he said.

"No, I haven't. We're new here. My neighbor Mrs. Duff told me to bring these to you, said you were the best in town."

"I'll have to thank her," Stanley said. "You've bought a house in Rolling Knoll, then."

"On Prospect Lane, next door to the Duffs. We love it."

"It's nice over there. How do you like Wallboro so far?"

"I think we're going to be very happy here. It's such a nice *little* city. My husband used to have to travel two hours to and from the office. Now he'll only be fifteen minutes from the plant."

Stanley felt a premonitory twinge. "Who's he with?" he asked.

"Consolidated Pipe and Tube. He's chief engineer. Of course the office will be downtown until they finish building the plant, but, even so, everything here is so much simpler and easier. Why just this morning —"

She continued to talk briskly, but Stanley was not listening. The great fear was upon him and he was wholly absorbed by the effort of maintaining some sort of control. When at last he shifted his gaze from the bowels of the iron to her face, she was still rattling along. Stanley heard none of it. He was feeling, somewhere behind his fear or commingled with it, a certain satisfaction: here at last was one of them, a tangible manifestation of the enemy. The knowledge was tonic, nourishing to his manhood. It gave him enough confidence to observe her with wary intensity as she talked.

He could see it then: the flat malign emptiness of the eyes, the cruel droop at the corners of the mouth, the clawing movements of the hands. This was, beyond any doubt, an agent of the conspiracy. She was admirably disguised, to be sure, but obvious enough when you knew what to watch for. And from now on he was going to be watching everyone very carefully, very carefully indeed.

"— away at college, so at least we don't have *that* worry," she was saying. She was very good.

"These shouldn't be too much trouble," Stanley said. He didn't think his voice revealed anything. "May I have your name, please?"

"Biddle," she said. "Mrs. Jason Biddle." Stanley wrote the name on two tags. He said, "About two weeks, Mrs. Biddle. You might call and check."

"I will," she said, and went out. The sweating Stanley sat down.

That evening when his wife said — as she did nearly every evening now — "Stanley, I *wish* you'd tell me what's the matter," he thought he had a sort of answer for her at last. It was a long way from a

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complete answer, but at least there was now something concrete, in the person of Mrs. Biddle, to talk about. He began to explain it all.

As he talked she said, "But what makes you think —?" and, "But why should they —?" and, "But they haven't done anyth —" and, finally, "Oh, Stanley, that's just *crazy*."

Stanley had of course already carefully considered that possibility and had rejected it. But it would be difficult to trace for her the reasoning that established that his head was perfectly sound and the danger real. And in any case, he was no longer sure that she was entirely to be trusted. She would not consciously do anything to harm him, he was reasonably certain of that; but the enemy was infinitely guileful and might find ways to use her without her knowledge.

In the event, that appeared to be what took place. Stanley's doctor called him at work one day, suggesting that Stanley drop in for a visit. Stanley, who was developing a certain guile of his own, agreed. It was quite clear that his only hope lay in maintaining some sort of surveillance of the others, and that could best be done by pretending to be unaware of their probing. He could visualize what had led to the doctor's call: his wife, over coffee cups at the kitchen table, unburdening herself to her mother and sister; Mom and Sis gleefully spreading the word to every gossip-pit in town; and then the swift dissemination of the story until it reached an ear that knew what it meant. Perhaps the ear of G.G. Scranton.

A suggestion would have come trickling back, then, culminating in an urgent recommendation by Mom and Sis (probably over the same cups at the same table) that Dr. Heinz be consulted without delay. And Dr. Heinz, already alerted through other channels, would have called Stanley immediately after he talked to Nora.

The doctor was getting on in years and had never wasted time on a bedside manner. He said, "Stanley, what's this Nora tells me about you thinking spooks are after you?"

Stanley's first act upon entering the office had been to subject the doctor to The Test. The Test was an infallible method of unmasking members of the conspiracy which Stanley had discovered more or less by accident at the time of his encounter with Mrs. Biddle. It consisted in staring fixedly at the suspect for a few moments while maintaining a certain rigid, complex, and wholly indescribable mental posture. If the subject was indeed one of the enemy, the stigmata became visible to Stanley;

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it was as if a veneer dissolved, giving him a view of the true creature beneath, a glimpse of the physiognomy of evil. Those who did not change under his piercing scrutiny were uncontaminated.

The doctor did not change; to Stanley's amazement and relief he remained the old Dr. Heinz. Stanley was almost overcome by gratitude and thanksgiving. At last — at long last — there was someone he could talk to, someone with the intelligence to grasp the magnitude of the conspiracy, someone who could be depended upon to offer good, common-sense advice. Someone who might even be enlisted to aid in a possible counterattack.

"Don't joke about it, Doc," he said. "When I tell you, you won't think it's a joking matter."

"Tell me, then, Stanley," the doctor said.

Stanley tried. After the fiasco of the explanation to his wife he had carefully organized all the facts, constructing a seamless chain of logic that established beyond argument that he was sorely bedeviled and hideously endangered; but now, as he laid the matter before Dr. Heinz, a number of the steps in his reasoning seemed to have fled his memory. He became increasingly aware that Heinz was not finding his exposition wholly persuasive and that his replies to the doctor's questions were beginning to sound somewhat shrill and desperate. "No, but, Doc, listen to what's happening now. They've got Dorothy Barr, Dorothy's Kard Shoppe, you know her. The first one was the Mrs. Biddle, she tipped me off. Then that red-haired cook at the diner. Now it's Dorothy. I spotted it a couple of weeks ago. They're *really* watching me now. And I don't know why. But I'll tell you one thing: I don't think they're even human. They don't even *look* human when you know what to look for. But why are they doing it? I've got to find out what they're doing out at that plant, Doc."

"Why, I think you know what they're doing, Stanley. They're putting up a steel mill. Going to produce seamless pipe. Bringing a lot of money into the county."

"But what about that dome, Doc? I've talked to half a dozen men who work for different contractors out there, and nobody knows what the dome is for. Nothing to do with making pipes, I can tell you that. Full of computers or something. Twenty electricians worked for a month in there, and none of them knows what it was they were wiring. There's something bad going on, Doc. They know I know it, too; that's why they're watching me this way. Watching and tapping my phone, why, my God, Doc —"

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"All *right*, Stanley," Heinz said. "Stop it now. Stop. That's better."

"OK. All right. I'm all right. But I'm really scared, Doc. Scared all the time. Jesus. Those eyes. Always watching, watching —"

"There's a man I want you to see, Stanley," Heinz said. "I'm going to make an appointment for you. You need more help here than I'm equipped to give. This really isn't my line."

"A headshrinker!" shouted Stanley, betrayed and horrified. "You think I'm crazy, too!"

"I think you're in need of some help, like all of us at one time or another. You've got to be relieved of this fear, Stanley, and I think Spector's just the man who can —"

But Stanley was gone, out the door and into the street, running. The doctor's office had become a trap. Heinz — Heinz! — was one of them. Or, no. No, he probably wasn't. Just by practicing his profession he would be serving their ends. Stanley had given a simple and straightforward recital of the facts, and it had sounded like raving. Stanley knew that very well. The doctor was a conscientious man of medicine; he would be bound to set in motion machinery that in the end would effect Stanley's imprisonment in an asylum, probably as asylum where the keepers belonged to the enemy. A dangerous trap, a close call.

Stanley pounded up to his car, scrambled into it, and drove off with a squeal of tires. He careened recklessly through the town, fleeing his Furies, knowing in his heart that there was no escape. The beast had too many tentacles, all in innocent disguise; any stranger, any acquaintance, any friend might be a limb of the enemy. Even if he fought back he had no hope of destroying that kind of creature. Suppose he eliminated every agent that The Test revealed, what then? How much does an anthill miss an ant — or a hundred ants?

He skidded to a stop in his usual parking place in front the The Appliance Clinic, quite unaware of how he had come to be there. His mind was still furiously busy with the train of thought he had begun as he ran from the doctor's office. Tentacles were what they were. Tentacles a better metaphor then ants. Chop tentacles, not step on ants. A creature with tentacles had a head. Chop off the head.

Chop off the head.

And suddenly there was a great hush, and peace came to Stanley. He sat quite still behind the wheel as a healing calm lapped and enveloped him, leaching away the tension and the terror and bringing to him a mindless contentment. There was, after all, something he

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could do. He could end all this. He could and he would. When the head is killed, the tentacles die.

He never knew how long he sat there; after the first enormous euphoria had subsided, he began to think again. He was pleased to discover that his mental processes had received great benefit from his terrible ordeal; his mind moved with cool and well-oiled precision toward the goal that he had somehow failed to see until now. For the first time in many months he had a feeling of confidence and assurance. The direction of his life was once more in his own hands.

It was a new Stanley who finally emerged from the car, a man with a purpose, a man determined to conquer his demons at whatever cost. He walked briskly to the hardware store across the mall, made the purchase of a butcher knife of the best quality, and returned to The Appliance Clinic, where he competently applied a whetstone until the knife had a scalpel edge. Then, with the knife in his hand, he went out of his door and into the door of Dorothy's Kard Shoppe. Dorothy rose from the chair at her little desk and said, "Hello, Stanley."

"This has gone far enough," Stanley said. "You're going to answer some questions." He held up the knife.

"Stanley?" she said.

"Don't stall me, Goddammit, I want an answer. Right now! Who's behind all this?"

"Stanley, I — Stanley, what are you talking about?"

"You don't think you were fooling me, do you? I've been on to you for a long time. *Now you give me the name.*" The knife flashed near her eyes.

"Oh, my God. Please, Stanley, what do you want?"

Her voice and her face were utterly terrified, utterly sincere. For a moment a wisp of doubt sullied the purity of Stanley's resolution. Was it possible that he'd made a mistake? Then he looked into her eyes, and saw in them only scorn and derision. He laid the edge against her throat.

"Tell me now. It's Scranton, isn't it? G.G. Scranton."

She opened her mouth, but only a croak emerged; a croak and a drool of spittle leaking down her chin. But he could see that the eyes still jeered at him, and he sliced powerfully.

At moderate speed it was about a twenty-minute drive from the Kard Shoppe to the new factory, and Stanley drove at moderate speed. There was no need now for frantic haste. He knew precisely what had to be done, and he knew precisely how he would do it. He had suspected Scranton almost from the first, but there hadn't

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been proof. Now he had that. Dorothy had —

He would not think about Dorothy just now.

He would think about what he was going to say to Scranton. Or need he say anything at all? The knife would say it. The knife would make the speech for him: Scranton, you monster, you've kept me in hell, and that's where I'm going to send you. You are an utter horror, beyond anything the mind can conceive, and I am going to dispose of you as you deserve. I will cut your throat. Cut your throat. I will —

The premises of Consolidated Pipe and Tube came into view, two enormous buildings standing parallel to each other, their ends to the road. Between them was the dome, a concrete hemisphere perhaps fifty feet high, its surface irregularly pocked with enigmatic metal-lined depressions. Across the road was the office building. Stanley parked carefully in a slot marked "Visitors."

The front wall of the lobby was an enormous sheet of glass two stories high, its perfection interrupted only by the steel framework of the door. The glass had been tinted against glare, and the light it admitted was of a curious reddish-brown color. There was no one at the reception desk or elsewhere in the great room as Stanley crossed it, a small figure holding a knife that reflected the autumnal light. He entered the corridor on the left and walked unhurriedly to its end, past many closed doors. The end of the corridor was also a door; it opened into the reception room for an executive suite, uninhabited. Three doors led from it. Stanley went without hesitation to the center door and entered.

Entered, and came face-to-face with G.G. Scranton.

G.G. Scranton was tall, slim, elegant, gray at the temples, and beautifully tailored. He said, "Here you are, then, Stanley. Have a seat." He turned and walked without haste to the chair behind the broad desk; he sat, leaned back, crossed his legs, laced his fingers across his chest, and said, "Crazy Stanley Scott. I'm a little surprised that you're still at large. You ought to be in a padded cell by now."

Stanley remained in the doorway, the knife in his hand. His single-minded drive toward the immediate dispatch of Scranton had suddenly and inexplicably vanished, and he was afraid again, and confused. He looked at the knife and then at Scranton. "I killed Dorothy Barr," he said.

"I know you did, Stanley. It wasn't at all necessary, but I don't suppose it matters greatly at this point. Sit down, please."

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Stanley sat. Scranton stared across the desk at the knife. Stanley laid it carefully on the floor and said, "You've got to tell me why."

"Yes, I suppose I do. You're entitled to that. Will you have a cigar?" He pushed a polished humidor toward Stanley, who mutely shook his head. Scranton selected a cigar and made a small ceremony of lighting it with a wooden match, while Stanley watched him with a fixed and fascinated stare. As Scranton waved the fire off the match, Stanley blurted, "You're not human, are you?"

"That's very perspicacious of you, Stanley," Scranton said. "No, I'm not."

"What —" Stanley had to swallow. "What are you, then?"

"That's a little hard to answer. If I gave you the name of my kind, it would only be a meaningless word. I am — like you, I am an intelligent being with a protoplasmic body. My proper and original form is quite different from my present appearance, as you've guessed. I have the useful ability to assume whatever shape I like, within limits. And I have the capacity to perform any number of amazing tricks by direct force of mind. I can, for example, sit here at this desk and keep watch on potential hazards by assuming control of the minds of conveniently located innocent bystanders and using their senses to do my spying." He smiled sardonically, and Stanley thought of Dorothy and Mrs. Biddle and the red-haired man at the diner.

"There is nothing supernatural about me," Scranton said, "although these things might make me seem so to you. I am a member of a race immeasurably older than yours, evolved along considerably different lines, and my abilities are quite natural. As you surmise, I am not a human being, but I am nonetheless a fellow-creature, warm-blooded and approximately mammalian."

Stanley found that he had passed beyond fear or incredulity; in a light-headed and dissociated way he was possessed by a ravenous curiosity. "From Outer Space?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, from Outer Space. Very far out. And Outer Time, too, one might say. These things tend to become somewhat intermixed when certain modes of transport are employed."

"Why did you — what are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? What indeed." Scranton was silent for a moment. Then he said, "This is what I've been doing here, Stanley: I have spent the past ten years taking control of Consolidated Pipe and Tube, for the sole and only

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purpose of providing the facilities and camouflage for building the apparatus housed in that dome out there. Before that, I spent about a century in manipulating the affairs of your race so that the technology necessary to build it would be developed. That involved a couple of major wars and a host of minor ones, and a space race, and a great many dreary years of slipping ideas into the minds of scientists and engineers and politicians. And before that, before it became clear that the construction of the apparatus had become necessary, I simply lived among the savages. I cannot say that I shall miss you."

"You mean you're going to leave?"

"I am going to leave. Quite soon."

"Well, then, in God's name, tell me," Stanley said. "Why me? Why were you hounding me? What could I do to you?"

There might have been something like compassion in Scranton's voice. "I wasn't hounding you, Stanley," he said. "I was watching you, yes. I had to do that. But the terror you suffered, your sense of calamity and doom — I was not causing those. At least not directly. You see something quite terrible is about to happen to the human race. The ultimate catastrophe, in fact. To put it bluntly, mankind has reached the end of its road."

Stanley believed him. The concept was too big to comprehend immediately, too awful for his mind's quick acceptance; but he knew Scranton was telling the truth. The beginnings of a host of questions and protests boiled up in his mind and failed of utterance. Scranton went on:

"The catastrophe is inevitable, and it is imminent, and it has cast its shadow before it. You have felt the chill of that shadow, Stanley. Your race has latent within it the ability to use its mind as my race does, and it has as well a buried talent that we do not have: the capacity to send perception along a chord of Time's circle — to see the future. The very enormity of the calamity that lies just ahead has forced a reaching across that chord; deep within the subconscious mind of every human being on Earth is the sure knowledge of imminent doom. In a few people it is very near to the surface. You are one of them, Stanley, and the only one unfortunate enough to be here in Wallboro, at the place where the end begins. That's why I watched you; there was always the possibility that something specific would break through to you, and you would try to frustrate me. At that point I had no intention of being annoyed by petty obstacles. I watched you to protect my plan."

"Your plan?" said Stanley.

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"Oh, come now, Stanley, don't pretend you're surprised. You've figured out what the apparatus in the dome is for, haven't you?"

Stanley realized that he had. He went rigid with shock and horror, staring at Scranton with incredulous eyes. The tableau held for a moment, and then Stanley exploded into furious motion, bending, grasping his knife, leaping for Scranton's throat. In midleap he was seized by an invisible, irresistible force and slammed to the floor. The knife jerked itself from his hand, hovered in the air for a moment, and then moved in a graceful arc to the desk, where it settled gently. The invisible force plucked Stanley off the floor and deposited him without gentleness in his chair.

Scranton said, "That was pointless."

Stanley made a frantic effort to get at Scranton; he could not move a muscle. He said in a strangled voice, "You can't do it!" Scranton did not reply. Stanley's voice went thin, high, and almost out of control. "But why, *why*? To — to kill all the people —"

"I'm afraid it's a little more than that," Scranton said. "The truth is that that gadget out there is not only going to kill humanity, it is going to eliminate life on Earth entirely, right down to the last bacterium and virus. Earth will be entirely dead, Stanley."

"*Why*?"

"I am hunted and pursued, Stanley, and I dare not leave clues behind me. My presence here has left ineradicable marks, but a lifeless planet will never even be investigated. It's simple self-protection. One does what he must when he is in jeopardy. Remember Dorothy Barr."

Stanley had a terrifying thought. "You've done this before, haven't you?"

"Many times, Stanley, many times." His face went bleak for a moment. "And I daresay I shall do it many times more."

"No!" Stanley shouted. "No, sir! It won't happen! You'll be stopped! Somebody will stop you!"

"I think not, Stanley. The fact is that it's already been done. Listen."

Somewhere near at hand an enormous tension was at that moment released, and a mighty surge of energy was generated and almost instantly quenched. There was no sound, there was not even a vibration; but Stanley could sense the ghostly edge of it, and he knew then, with a cold and desolate certainty, that the unthinkable had taken place. Inside him something stopped. His mind made a few frantic lunges, recognized the futility of it, and opted for numbness. He sat and stared with

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dull eyes through the tall windows behind Scranton. Night had fallen as they talked, and the unchanging sky was full of stars.

"The end," Scranton said. "The end, without even a whimper. And only you are left. Here in this room we are in the eye of the storm, as it were, and for a moment you have been spared. It leaves you very much alone, Stanley, more alone than ever a man was before. But I'll be leaving in a moment, and when I do, the room will no longer be protected. You won't suffer loneliness long." He opened a drawer of the desk and removed a device of black metal, about the size of the cigar humidor. "My transportation," he said. "Is there anything more you'd like to say before I go?"

The dull eyes shifted to look at him. "Yes," Stanley's leaden voice said. "Two questions. Will you tell me what you did that you should be hounded for so long and pursued so far? And who are the pursuers?"

Scranton snapped erect. "Did?" he said indignantly. "What it was that I did?" His face twisted. "I did nothing. *Nothing*. You haven't understood at all. You think I'm a criminal on the run. Well, you're wrong, quite wrong." His air of cool detachment had left him; his voice was aggrieved and resentful now, with an undercurrent of feckless anger. "I'm being hideously persecuted. I'm much more of a victim than you and your grubby kind. I've been harassed for no reason for longer than you can imagine. And they never relent, never ease the pressure."

"You say 'they,'" Stanley said. "Who are 'they?" It was important to talk. Talking kept reality at bay.

"Enemies," Scranton said. "Horrible enemies. They never expose themselves, but they're there, they're out there somewhere. There's no way to fight them. That's why I have to keep running and hiding." A crafty expression came over his face. "I'm good at that. I know how to cover my tracks. You've seen that." He suddenly became fearful. "But they always get close again. It's so hard to keep ahead of them. I'm tired."

"But who?" Stanley said. "Tell me who."

"I don't know, you fool, I don't know. They're just there, and they hate me, they hate me. They may be watching me now. That's what they do, you know. They watch me." He cast an apprehensive glance over his shoulder at the window. "Somewhere they're watching. Some day they'll pounce. It's not fair. It's not *fair*."

The mad eyes met Stanley's in a mute appeal for sympathy and understanding. Outside in the night a breeze had risen and made familiar noises against the windowpane.

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In which Ms. Moore turns her inventive talent to a description of the bizarre results of an encounter session in Paul Nopper's freshman comp class.

Man Volant

by RAYLYN MOORE

It didn't happen all at once. At first it was like moving in the gravity of a small planet, Paul Nopper thought. He took a step that turned into a stride, a stride that turned into a leap, a leap that turned into a *grand jete.* Which was pleasant indeed, for up to that moment he had never been noted for being graceful.

He had landed on the point of a rock, on one toe no less, feeling like Nureyev, and it occurred to him that he just might be able to leap, or glide, or swoop through the air from that point of rock to another about twenty-five yards downhill. So he did, and landed safely. Nothing to it.

Mind-fucking, that's all it is. And this one a real bummer. Like, how do we know he isn't faking?

But then he heard Rheba Poppageorgas calling, "Mr. Nopper, Mr. Nopper. Up here." And looked and there she was, nearly a quarter mile across the clear distance, on the other side of a wide canyon. Waving.

Without too much thought — in case he might chicken out on account of that canyon — he just took off and flew over to where she was and landed beside her. Of course by that time she had giggled teasingly and taken off for a pinnacle even higher.

For the moment, though, he couldn't care less what Rheba did. He was ecstatic. He was flying!

I'm flying! I'm flying! he thought to himself. This is no masturbatory dream, no vicarious shuck, courtesy of three-dee moom-pitchers. I — really — am — flying. (Look, ma, no net.)

Hey, this is going way out. Maybe I'll stick around after all. This is getting tough. There's nothing down in electronics lab like this, aye, Dunsty? Sure beats trying to build your own cath tube.

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He let Rheba cool it on her high perch while he did some more experimenting. Doesn't hurt to check out your potential right at the start, he thought. He flew quite a long distance over some rough, grubby-gray terrain, then made a wide, nicely banked U-turn and started back.

He increased altitude simply by raising his head and striking a path toward the zodiac. When he got high enough that the air was noticeably thinner, he dropped his arms to his sides and went into a dive just for the hell of it. Just to scare the bejeesus out of himself before leveling out and ascending.

The second time he came down in a bellyflop position, falling free, and the landscape was looming up powerfully close before he put out his arms and started flying again.

He hadn't done anything so showoff since he was a kid. But Rheba from her distant peak was watching it all. Was she what was making him behave this way?

When he flew over to join her this time, she didn't split. She said admiringly, "Wow, Mr. Nopper, you're good."

"I want you to call me Paul. Actually, I want the whole damn class to call me Paul, but I know better than to try to force a thing like that."

"Uh-huh."

He looked Rheba Poppageorgas over critically for the umpteenth time, wondering for the umpteenth time what all the shouting was about. She was a floppy kind of girl, actually. That is, she had a lot of yellowish hair, long and thick and hanging, and that flopped around under a blue scarf. And a lot of mammary tissue, and that flopped around under a scruffy-white teeshirt that said on the front in scarlet letters:

I MADE THE TEAM
(And Vice Versa)

Under her jeans, however, Rheba did no flopping. Everything there was solid and well organized. Her face was small and kind of pinched-looking, like an antique china doll's, with a short upper lip that curled away from the lower as if they had never met, much less were working parts of the same organ. And, indeed, he believed he had never seen her with her mouth closed all the way. In fact, Rheba always looked as if she was about to speak, though heaven knew she never had much to say.

Paul Nopper wanted to seize that upper lip between his teeth and bring his jaws together hard. He wanted to smack the solid bottom of the jeans and rip the ridiculous teeshirt up one side and down the other.

From the moment he'd first seen Rheba sitting in row one of his freshman comp class, his whole

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semester had been ruined. Not that other factors in his life hadn't entered into his ruination, but Rheba had blown his mind clean as an easteregg shell. Her presence was so distracting he couldn't keep his head on what other students were saying long enough to answer their questions.

Usually he copped out by growling something like: "Look it up somewhere. Learn to use a library, why don't you? Never get through college if you don't show a little initiative." One thing about Rheba, *she* probably wouldn't get through college, initiative or no. Except for the hair, she didn't have much under the scarf; what she had was all under the teeshirt. But at least she didn't bother him with questions. And she did fly very well.

"You fly very well yourself, Rheba," he said generously.

"Natch. It was my idea, wasn't it? Wanta try taking hands?"

"You mean fly while we hold hands? Can it be done?"

"Sure, why not?"

What happens if the bell rings and they're still out there? I don't want to miss anything, but I got this big old hangen test in psych next hour and there's no makeups.

They flew in a straight line this time, no more swooping and darting and fooling around. Rheba's hand was moist and fleshy, like a hunk of melted cheese. "Do you know where we're going?"

"Sure. Don't worry, Mr. Nopper — Paul."

Gray crags and precipices and folds of mountains went sliding under them like a piece of rumpled fabric far below. Once in a while they met and passed some bird or other, one big enough to be an eagle. The eagle — or maybe it was just a large hawk — peered at them in pure, bird-eyed astonishment, then quickly changed course so as to be well out of their way. Rheba giggled.

Paul Nopper found himself strangely moved, that is, moved beyond the sheer visceral thrill, to which, though it didn't diminish, he was becoming almost accustomed. "Do you know," he said in his freshman-comp voice, "that we are acting out one of man's most atavistic dreams, to fly without mechanical assistance? It's a mythic theme as old as the human race. And now, for us at least, it's finally possible, a fact of aerodynamics rather than just a convention of dream literature. Think of it, Rheba. We may be the first fully realized human beings."

"Uh-huh. There's a nest up ahead on that next peak. Wanna stop?"

"A — nest?"

"Uh-huh."

"How do you know?"

"Gee, I just see it there is all.

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You said the rules were I could see anything I want."

"Did I say that?"

"Uh-huh."

It was almost worth the painful, half-semester's lusting after Rheba Poppageorgas to see a plan of his own devising working so beautifully, and with no help from himself now. He had only been the instigator. His only regret was that he hadn't taken the initiative earlier in their acquaintance. Or, rather, set the pychological machinery in motion which would allow *her* to take the initiative, as she was doing now. There must be a lot more to Rheba Poppageorgas than met the eye, and a good thing, too. A competent imagination, for instance. She was doing all right.

Jesus. There's the bell and they're still out. Whadaya think we oughta do, Dunsty? Call somebody?

Still holding hands, they decelerated and lowered themselves into a round, basketlike structure made of sticks, the diameter of which was about the length of a garden hammock. There was no problem of the sticks poking them as they lay in the bottom of the enclosure, for the interior was thickly lined with rumpled, loosely arranged greenbacks. "Why, it's the jackdaw's nest," Paul said in startled recognition.

"Huh?" said Rheba, wriggling out of the loose teeshirt.

"Uh. Never mind. I — uh — thought I recognized — a literary allusion is all. Shall we — uh—"

Rheba skinned out of her jeans.

Just before he had her, Paul noticed that the rumpled bills around them seemed to be all large denominations, hundreds, five hundreds, and thousands. Then he hit the jackpot.

...but not till after five-thirty, okay?...can't find my fucking notebook, which I left right in this fucking room last week...and then she went past wearing this very funky outfit, white leather bells and an orange-and-red striped bodyshirt with a cutout over the navel... so I told him he had till noon to get all his shit out of the house, so he did and that was the last I saw of him and now I'm sorry...

Now, suddenly, there was a strange voice shouting from down below. No, not strange. Paul recognized the voice. Unfortunately.

"All right, Nopper, the game's over. What the hell do you think you're doing, anyway? Is this your idea of how to teach a freshman comp class?"

Paul put his head over the side of the nest and there, far down below, waving and shouting and bouncing around in annoyance, was his beloved supervisor, Roderick Steergreen, chairman of the English department.

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Distance made Steergreen seem even smaller than he actually was, and the intoxicating proximity of the naked Rheba, who now had a bruised upper lip, made Paul seem more courageous than *he* actually was. Or maybe it was just the thinner atmosphere up around the nest. Anyway, Paul called down: "Get lost, Steergreen. If you want to evaluate one of my classes, you should at least have the courtesy to notify me in advance."

"This is no evaluation, you fool. It's an emergency."

"Drop dead, you swine, you fat-ass, you turd."

A little charge of silent static, which Paul correctly identified as Steergreen's shocked outrage, shot up toward the nest from the ground. Then Steergreen spoke with measured menace: "I hope for your sake, Nopper, that it can be medically proved you've lost your mind, as seems likely from the evidence so far."

"I haven't lost my mind. Quite the contrary, I think I may have just found it — all of it — for the first time. At least for the first time in our miserable association I find myself in a position to tell you what I think of you, Steergreen, you pusillanimous prick, you condensed fart, you —"

"COME DOWN FROM THERE AT ONCE OR I'M CALLING THE COPS!"

"Ha, ha. You think I'm scared of a few pigs? I can fly, you know."

"So I hear," Steergreen said sourly.

"Really? Who told you?"

"One Randy Dunstan, a student unfortunate enough to be studying freshman composition with you, was concerned for your safety and mental well-being. He told me all about it."

"All about what? What did he tell you?"

"It's no use being coy, Nopper. I know everything: how you organized the class into a sensitivity training group, got them all to lie on the floor like spokes in a wheel, with their heads together; then how you deliberately enticed an ordinarily inarticulate female student into an elaborate bit of fantasizing, after which you personally joined her in her fantasy."

"Mmmm," said Paul Nopper reflectively.

"But what *you* may not know is that after the bell rang, the rest of the class got up off the floor, but they couldn't rouse either you or Miss Poppageorgas."

Paul Nopper thought this over. Then he said, "I don't quite understand, though, how *you* got into Miss Poppageorgas's fantasy too."

"The same way you did, you idiot. I walked through the door of your classroom and lay down on the floor with you. I'm lying on the

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floor now, and I swear if this insanity goes on much longer and somebody off campus gets wind of it and there's any awkwardness in the press or anything, I'll *per*sonally—"

"Aha," said Paul, "so you can't call the cops after all, can you, Steergreen, you filthy liar?"

"Look, Nooper, there's no reason we can't both be reasonable about this, is there? Come down from there peaceably and nothing more need be said, either on campus or off."

"I don't trust you, Steergreen. I have never trusted you. Your eyes are too close together."

"By the way, you do have Miss Poppageorgas up there with you, don't you? Tampering with a minor student's mental or moral state can be a serious thing. *Is* she there?"

Paul looked over his shoulder at Rheba, fetally curled among the greenbacks in the bottom of the nest, apparently napping. The first joint of her left thumb was inserted between her interesting lips. "Wouldn't you like to know?" he said.

Below, Steergreen could be seen drawing a long breath and compressing his lips in an apparent attempt to control his temper. Finally he said, "See here, Nopper, one of the main points of transactional analysis is supposed to be talking things out in a totally free and uninhibited way, right? So as long as we find ourselves in this encounter session together, why not make use of it? I certainly don't mind telling you what *I* think. I quite agree that use of the t-group — in a controlled situation, that is — in a freshman composition class can be a valuable learning experience. It can motivate marginal students to express themselves, and it can provide those more capable of mastering communications skills with valuable enrichment. But if you'll recall, all the education literature warns strongly against its use in irresponsible hands. Not that our dilemma here is entirely without precedent, Nopper. I was reading in an education journal only recently about an ill-advised instructor-facilitator who in a class experiment attempted to mitigate the frigidity of a student by advising her to imagine herself diminished in stature to a half centimeter so that she could enter her own vagina and investigate her difficulty. Under guise of offering guidance, he diminished himself and followed her into her cavity. She reacted badly and a professional had to be summoned. In the ensuing confusion, the instructor was accused of statutory rape. The case was thrown out of court of course, but the object lesson remains. Now what I advise in your case, Nopper—"

"Steergreen, old man—" interrupted Paul.

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"Yes?"

"Why don't you shut your pedantic fucking mouth?"

This time there was no reply from below. Paul supposed Roderick was treading water, trying to think of a new approach, and with the speed at which Steergreen's brain functioned, this might take some time. Meanwhile, Paul withdrew his head from the edge of the nest.

He stuck it back out a minute later, however, having just thought of a great idea. By standing up in the nest and leaning slightly forward, he would be in a position to micturate in the direction of Steergreen's upturned face.

But now, unfortunately for that plan, the department chairman had disappeared from the foot of the cliff.

Paul returned his attention to Rheba. She squirmed and giggled when she felt his hands on her skin. "I don't think they can bug us as long as we stay up high," he reported, in case she needed reassurance.

She shrugged nakedly. "Who's worried?" she said.

"So what would you like to do now, Rheba? Fly some more? Or—?"

"Yeah, 'or'," she said. So she and Paul nestled down among all that money and once more Paul Nopper hit the jackpot.

A little later they were wakened rudely by a terrible uproar from below. The whien of a diesel in low gear, the clanging of an unmelodious bell, and some more shouting.

Again Paul peered over the edge of the nest and saw that Roderick had thrown caution to the winds after all, having returned and brought with him two official vehicles and a number of people.

The two vehicles, both belonging to the local fire department, were the snorkel hoist, ordinarily used for the rescue of kittens from the tops of utility poles and citizens from the tops of high buildings during fires, and the beach-and-cliff rescue unit, which carried an assortment of respirators, winches, pulleys, litters, and such. A couple of firemen were already climbing into the snorkel tub; one of them carried a fat coil of tenuous yellow rope which glistened with strength.

In a flash Paul could see the whole fatuous plot. The two firemen would be boosted as high up the cliff with the nest on it as the snorkel elevator would go, then they'd break out their pitons and carabiners and hand-over-hand it the rest of the way up.

Paul laughed at the colossal agglomeration of collective ignorance it had required to hatch such a scheme. He and Rheba could simply fly off — after waiting till the climbing crew got just about to the

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goal, of course, so as to extract the optimum dramatic effect from their flight. He was still the facilitator after all, and it was still Rheba Poppageorgas's fantasy after all. So by the rules none of the firemen or anyone else who joined the t-group could fly after them unless Rheba fantasied it that way.

She was beside him now, with her teeshirt back on, leaning on her elbows and looking down, lips slightly parted, blue scarf slightly askew. "You do know, don't you, Rheba," he reminded her, "that we'll be absolutely safe so long as you don't let any of them fly, just us?"

"Course," she said. "Whadaya think I am? Stupid?"

And then he saw with renewed interest that three other people not in firemen's uniform were advancing on the scene. Two men and a woman. One of the men had a clerical collar so shining pure it dazzled Paul's eyes even at that distance. He took a better look at the woman and had his first moment of dismay since joining Rheba in her fantasy.

"Lucille, forgodsake," he hollered. "What are *you* doing here?" Lucille was Paul Nopper's estranged wife. He hadn't seen her for six months.

"Oh, Paul, don't do it," Lucille shouted back, wringing her hands. It reminded him all over again what a hand-wringer Lucille was. Not bad looking in a willowy brunette way, but jumpy, repressed, and prudish. In short, a hand-wringer. Unless convinced of the direct emergency, Lucille would never get within a mile of anything to do with an encounter experience, much less lie on the floor of a classroom, or any other floor for that matter. For any reason. That had been one of the main troubles with their marriage, come to think of it. Paul was partial to floors. So what on earth had they told her to get her here?

"Don't do what?" Paul said with genuine curiosity.

"Don't jump!" she screeched.

"But I haven't the faintest intention of—"

"Son," the clergyman cut in, "these things can be worked out with patience and reflection. Don't forget that the darkest hours come just before dawn. One thing about being all the way down, there's no direction to go from there but up. The thing is, you have to give life a chance to prove this to you. Every cloud has a silver lining. Tomorrow is another day."

"You people have it all wrong," Paul explained. "We're not going to jump. We're going to fly."

At this Lucille burst into tears. "I'll come back to you," she wailed. "We'll get you the best psychiatric treatment we can afford."

The notion of Lucille coming

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back was not exactly a joyful one to Paul. Though the separation had been her idea and not his, he had come to the conclusion several times over in the recent half year that for once in her life Lucille had done something right. "We won't be able to afford any at all, best or worst," he called cheerfully back. "I've just lost my job at the college. But thanks anyway, Lucille. Why don't you run along now? They'd no business involving you in this."

"Oh, *Paul!*" And Lucille wrung her hands again.

The third party at the foot of the cliff, beside part of the fire crew that remained earthbound and Roderick Steergreen (looking quite smug now that he imagined he had competent assistance), turned out, predictably, to be a psychiatrist. He did not want to talk with Paul Nopper, however. He was too shrewd for that.

"Miss Poppageorgas, I'm Doctor DeVincenzi. How's the weather up there?"

"Same as down there, looks like," said Rheba reasonably.

"Ha-ha," said Dr. DeVincenzi. "I hear you've been having a very enriching experience in Mr. Nopper's English composition class."

"Uh-huh."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Huh-uh."

"You can trust me, Rheba. That's your name, isn't it, Rheba?"

"Uh-huh."

"My name is Forrest but everybody calls me Buck. I hear you can fly. I'd like to try it myself. Why don't you imagine me flying up to where you are? Then we can get to know each other better."

"Huh-uh."

But by now it had become evident that all the talk-talk was largely a ruse to divert attention from the two-man "rescue" team, which had, sure enough, zoomed up on the boom of the snorkel, sunk in its pitons, and was even now only about a hundred feet away down the face of the cliff and moving up as steadily as a pair of cockroaches on a wall.

"Get ready to abandon ship, Rheba," Paul said in a low voice.

"Huh?"

"We'll be taking off in a couple of minutes. We *can* still fly, can't we?"

"Course."

"The only thing I can't figure out is what to do about the money."

"Whadda we need money for?"

"Exactly. The best things in life are free, eh, Rheba? You're pretty smart after all." And he kissed her tenderly on her damaged upper lip.

A few minutes later the crowd below gave a shout as the hand of the first mountaineer-fireman clutched the edge of the nest, and at that same moment Rheba Pop-

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pageorgas and Paul Nopper rose off their couch of paper money and ascended toward the meridian. The shouting swelled and took on a note of frenzy. Lucille Nopper's voice could be distinguished over the others in a sustained keening.

The fugitive pair circled the scene at high altitude, then dropped several hundred feet and circled again with admirable synchronization of movement and enviable grace. Paul was conscious of a complicated montage of impressions: the climbers rappelling rapidly, evidently without having discovered the money; Lucille sobbing in the arms of the shrink; Steergreen hopping on one foot, shaking his fist at heaven.

Dirty sonofabitch making the college a laughingstock never hear the end of it maybe my own neck too...curious case for the books, never heard of sensitivity-training session with such superb results... Our Father who is (perhaps) in heaven...filthy sonofabitch if he thinks for one *minute I'd* really *go back to him...*

Of course Paul knew even now, steeped as he was in euphoria, high simply on being high, that flying wasn't really an answer to everything. For one thing, he couldn't quite see spending the rest of his life swooping around with Rheba Poppageorgas and housekeeping in a nest. Even a nest full of money. Even a nest sate in her self-created fantasy. (She was a ringer, all right, though. He wouldn't ever look at her again and wonder what the shouting was all about.) And for another, he knew that sooner or later the people back there on the ground would figure out a way to come down heavy, in which case he and Rheba would probably come down hard.

But what the hell, Paul told himself, you only live one minute at a time. And how often in this world do you get a fully realized, atavistic experience, especially a shared one?

So they flew on, and on, until they turned first into nailheads, and then periods, and then pinpoints in the enormous sky.

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John Thames Rokesmith is the author of several western novels, such as The Empty Saddle, Jackal's Hide, They Met in Dodge City, *and* West of West Pecos; *but his best known book is undoubtedly his best selling ... well, anyway, his good selling ... biography of Tom Mix,* Straight Shooters Always Win. *He wrote the screenplay for the movie,* Seven Notches to Glory, *and he has written for television. He is possibly the only member of the Western Writers of America who has taken part in a real cattle drive — "the most rewarding experience of my life," he frequently says (see "Straight Shooters Always Win" by Arthur Jean Cox in the May, 1974,* F&SF).

Writers of The Purple Page

by JOHN THAMES ROKESMITH

I am one of the Writers of the Purple Page.

Forgive me, if I rather insist upon that, because it has been denied — by certain persons who know absolutely nothing of the matter. They have even gone so far as to say that I was not actually present on that never-to-be-forgotten evening at the O K Corral. But the plain facts are that I *am* a Writer of the Purple Page — and I am sure that before I am done the reader will come to recognize, purely on the basis of internal evidence, the truth of that statement — and that I *was* present on the evening in question and have as much right as anyone, and more than most, to publish an account of what occurred then.

But I should explain a few things for the benefit of those who haven't read (and for the benefit of those who have read) the somewhat inadequate account published in *The Los Angeles Times* under the heading, SHOOT-OUT AT THE O.K. CORRAL, and which other newspapers about the country have picked up and copied.

First, you should know that the Writers of the Purple Page is a club, a rather informal club, of western-story writers, and that we meet for dinner the second

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Saturday of every month at the O K Corral, a restaurant-bar on Santa Monica Boulevard in Los Angeles. The O K Corral is, admittedly, not as classy a joint as some of those on the famous "Restaurant Row" on nearby La Cienega. In fact (and I hope Leo will forgive me for saying this) it looks rather shabby from the outside, with its giant cowboy twirling a neon lariat. But we were simply unable to resist the name. And Leo does give us a nice private dining room to ourselves and humors us in various ways.

The club has only 13 members, but the gatherings usually number more because each member may bring a guest. For some reason, there were only two guests at the beginning of this fateful meeting, one of whom I had brought. My guest was my old friend, Joseph Phillips, who will be referred to hereafter as "Phil." I mention him not only because he played a part in the events of the evening, but because he can vouch for what follows. And who will vouch for Phil, you ask? Well, you would, if you knew him. Henry Fonda couldn't convey a more satisfying impression of honesty, modesty and intelligent simplicity. Phil and I worked together not long ago on a cattle drive. The other guest was a high-school English teacher brought by Sam Clemenceau. I don't suppose he was actually a mute, but he might just as well have been. He was at first so overawed by the illustrious company and then by the events that followed — this was my impression at the time, anyway — that he never said so much as a single word all evening.

Our newest member, who had been introduced at the previous meeting, had still not shown at 9:30. We had delayed dinner an hour, waiting for him; for our time-honored custom, going back to immemorial antiquity — that is, for four or five years — is that a new member always gives a talk or reads a story or provides some other sort of entertainment at his first official meeting.

At long last, the venerable Sandy Burr, our white-haired Lead Rider (otherwise, Chairman) rapped his pipe on the long table. "Fellow members, I think we've scared Mr. Rhodes away. I suggest we call in the waiters and order dinner."

This motion was gratefully and loudly seconded by Luke Long, the Sidekick, with some support from me. The Prospector had already collected the dues; and the Scrivener had noted the names of those present; and Louis Love, the Ramrod, now took his place at table nearest the door from the bar, to eject any uninvited persons wandering in from that alcoholic direction.

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I should make clear that there are three doors leading into and out of our private dining room. The most often used is the door from the bar, above which is mounted a deer's head with dark pathetic eyes — I never look at it without thinking of Bambi's mother. Exactly opposite is a wide double door connecting us with the restaurant proper. The various comings and goings of waiters, cocktail girls, members, visitors and interlopers through one or another of these portals have sometimes reminded me of the entrances and exits of the Messengers in a Greek tradegy. At least, I suppose they remind me of that — I've never seen a Greek tragedy. The third door is strictly an emergency fire-exit door, never opened, never used.

Carlos and Frank came in and took our orders. Although we all sit at a single long board, as at a conference table, we don't dine banquet style but order separately. I asked for minestrone soup with sesame crackers, a tossed green salad with rochefort dressing, roast beef (rare) with peas and a double portion of potatoes, French bread with lots of butter, coffee and apple pie a la mode. Social occasions make me hungry ... and, besides, I had had two Tom Collinses and thought I should put something in my stomach to soak them up. Herbert Aster, who had seated himself at the head of the table, on the other side of Phil, ordered only an egg sandwich and a glass of milk. Social occasions take away his appetite ... but then everything takes away his appetite. I think he feeds mostly upon his inexhaustible sense of injury; with the result that he has the lean and hungry look of a Cassius or a Lee Harvey Oswald. He always looks as if he were plotting an assassination.

I mentioned Herb rather pointedly because he had a good deal to do with the climactic event of the evening. At least, I think he did. I can't be sure. I'm often a little unsure about Herb. I sometimes feel a curious twitch in my right leg when in his company, but how can you kick Hyde without injuring Jekyll? I've seen Herb at home with his wife and children, and there he's quite a different person. His ambition, like that of Frederick Faust, better known as Max Brand, was to be a poet; but lines of verse don't support a growing family, and so he has come to be Jimson Weed, a popular and highly paid writer of western novels, and he feels the degradation of that very much. Once, in a former phase of my existence, I addressed him as Poet Aster: that is, "poetaster," an inferior poet. I was instantly ashamed of myself — it had just sort of slipped out —

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and apologized, but he has never quite forgiven me for it. And yet, what had I done except taken him as my example? That's the kind of thing he habitually says to other people. But, like the few other satirists I've known, Herb has a glass jaw; he can dish it out, but he can't take it.

Our dinner-time discussion this evening, the main course anyway, consisted of the usual shoptalk and gossip, but during dessert the conversation turned upon our missing member — which sounds gruesomely amputatory or castratory, but refers of course to the absent Rhodes.

"He looks to me," said Luke Long, from the far end of the table — Luke is a two-time winner of the Spur and, after Sandy Burr, the oldest man in the group — "he looks to me like he should be writing drawing-room comedies, not westerns."

"You mean," said Herb Aster, "you think he's a phony."

"No, I don't! I'd appreciate it, Herb, if you wouldn't put words in my mouth."

"Have you read his novel?" I asked. I meant *Blanks in My Gun*, Rhodes' sole paperback western (and his qualification for membership in The Writers of the Purple Page). "It's the best written western I've read in years. A man who can write that well can be forgiven."

"Forgiven for what?" asked Sandy Burr. Sandy, who had personally known Max Brand and Zane Grey, was sitting across the table, under an atmospheric painting by Remington showing a trooper taken prisoner by Indians.

"Oh, forgiven for his handsome face, his charming manners, his neat mustache. We might even forgive him for —"

"You know," interrupted John Peters, who was sitting opposite me and, as always, next to John (or "Coach") Wainwright, "he's the only writer I've ever met who actually looks like a writer."

Sam Clemenceau agreed. "The next time I have a public appearance to make, I'm going to hire him to go in my place."

"We might even," I persisted, "forgive him for his voice."

"Yeah!" — Peters, again. "You know who his voice reminds me of?"

"Ronald Coleman, of course. If that's not his natural voice, it's the best 'impression' of Ronald Coleman I've ever heard. He's caught those rhythmic cadences perfectly. But here's something odd. When we were introduced and shook hands, he said to me, 'Please don't call me "Dusty." "Monty" will do. I was called "Dusty" all through high school and became more than a little tired of the name.'"

"What's odd about that?

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'Dusty Rhodes' is just what the other kids would call him."

"It's odd for this reason: On the title page of his book there's a line that reads: *Copyright © 1974 by Stanley M. Rosenberg.*"

This piece of information seemed far more startling than I had supposed, for not only did everyone fall silent upon receipt of it, but those few who were still eating suspended that interesting activity — suspended it literally in one or two cases, spoons and forks hovering near mouths without going in. On looking about in the direction their eyes were turned, I saw that the door to the bar had opened so silently that the Ramrod, whose business it was to guard that door, had not been aware of it till now. And that a man, a very distinguished-looking man, wearing a tweed jacket with leather patches at the elbow, a silver scarf about his throat and a briar pipe in his mouth, was standing (in light-colored trousers) in the doorway. How long he had been standing there, looking on and listening with that consciously amused and "superior" expression we didn't know. It was a slightly embarrassing situation, though not terribly so .... just enough to cause a momentary hush. It was the first such hush to fall upon the room that evening, but by no means the most profound.

Stanford Montagu Rhodes, if that were truly his name, favored us with an elegant bow that would have graced a 1930s movie about the Idle Rich.

"Writers of the Purple Page, my abject apologies!" Yes, it was Ronald Coleman's voice, all right. "It is disgraceful that I should be late on this, of all evenings! I have, of course, an excuse. I was ... ah, summoning ... some friends whom I wish to introduce to you tonight. They will be here shortly."

"Mr. Rhodes," said Sandy Burr, "perhaps you didn't know, but each member is limited to one guest per meeting."

"Ah! I didn't know! I hope you will forgive me. It would be impossible to do anything about it now. They will be here very shortly, and I don't see how they can be turned away."

"Are any of them pretty?" asked Peters.

Rhodes smiled. "Pretty? No. But striking. Picturesque."

Even as he spoke, the wide double door leading into the restaurant portion of the building opened with what might be called dramatic slowness ... or perhaps cinematic slowness; that is, as in slow motion ... and we saw framed in it four — five — six Indians arrayed in a lavish and colorful regalia. I had an almost overwhelmed impression of feather

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headdresses in full plumage, of red-brocaded blankets, leather trousers, fringed tunics, beaded moccasins, and of bristling weaponry: a spear, a bow, a quiverful of arrows, a long rifle, a tomahawk, a hunting knife.

And Stanford Montagu Rhodes, ceremoniously stepping forward with extended hand, invited these barbaric men into the room.

They entered, paced towards us gravely. The small noises of the room subsided and lapsed into silence ... a silence so complete you might have heard a twig snap underfoot.

They stopped at a sign from Rhodes, stood facing us, holding themselves very erect. Their faces were modeled of firm brown flesh; their broad chests were (with one rather leathery exception) sheathed in leather; their feather headdresses blazed in spreading fans of color: aureoles of glory, testimonials of peacock pride, displays of barbaric craft. Their faces were impassive, their eyes steady, as if they were accustomed, like eagles, to seeing their prey or their enemy afar off. They were real — unspeakably real: I could actually feel the heat of their assembled bodies, as from a campfire some dozen feet away.

"Gentlemen," said Rhodes, turning towards us, "these are my friends whom I shall shortly more particularly introduce. They are, as you see, American Indians. And you are western story writers, the representatives, I might even say the last few representatives, of the frontier, of the American West. You represent in your persons the pioneer, the trapper, the settler, the rancher and, of course, the cowboy: men who were sometimes the friends but more often, far more often, the enemies of the Indian. I say that you are the last representatives because it is you who body forth the Spirit of the Old West — much more so, it seems to me, than does the modern rancher and the rodeo cowboy, because you are so much more conscious and complete; and it is undoubtedly you who keep alive those old confrontations between the White Man and the Red Man. It is you who re-enact those dark and bloody scenes in your stories — in your books, movies and teleplays — reliving always and always the fateful past, as if there were something in it which you wished to master or to exorcise ... and which, obviously (since you return to it again and again, as to an unrelieved irk or unresolved conflict) you never quite succeed in doing.

"Gentlemen, our ancestors were not fair and just to the Indian. We took away his lands, his livelihood, his culture and his self-respect, and we cast him forever into the role of villain and alien in our popular

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culture. Fellow craftsmen and colleagues, winners of the Spur, Writers of the Purple Page, Avatars of the Old West, this is a fateful meeting. Here stand before you the inheritors of a once proud tradition, the survivors of a people who ruled a continent vaster than Russia and embodied a tradition older than that of civilized Europe. Gentlemen," and here Rhodes stepped back and made a dramatic flourish, "allow me to present:

"*Pontiac, Chief of the Ottowa*" — and the foremost Indian, wearing a magnificent headdress and bearing a leather shield and carrying in his left hand an upward-pointing spear, stepped forward;

"*Tammany, Chief of the Delaware*" — and a second Indian, likewise plumed and feathered, bearing over his left shoulder a long bow and at his back a quiver of arrows, stepped forward;

"*Tecumseh, Chief of the Shawnee*" — and another, displaying only a single black feather sprouting upward from the back of his head and carrying athwart his body a long rifle, the polished barrel of which rested in the crook of his left arm, joined the first two;

"*Logan, Chief of the Mingo*" — and a fourth, a man whose ravaged visage seemed to me like some massive rock weathered by rain and thunder, and who carried in his right hand a grim tomahawk, likewise volunteered himself;

"*Sitting Bull, Chief of the Sioux*" — and there came forward the penultimate Indian, from whose belt there hung suspended a shock of yellow hair, but who bore in his hands nothing more sinister than a long-stemmed pipe;

"*Geronimo, Chief of the Apache*" — and there stepped forward, with the decisiveness of a paratrooper stepping out the wind-buffeted door of an airplane (and, in fact, there was strapped to his back a pack of some sort) the last Indian, stripped to the waist and wearing only a pair of leather trousers and buskins, and who seemed to have divested himself of every trace of finery and to have become, judging by his face and eyes, the bare rudimentary core of unflinching resolution.

And so they stood, confronting us, these grim warriors bristling with weaponry. They had taken us by surprise. They had fallen upon us when we least expected it. We were disarmed. We had nothing to say in our own defense.

But, suddenly, the silence was shattered by an alarming cry, a cry compounded of I don't know what feelings, but one of which was surely an overweening scorn — the very voice, as it seemed to me for a moment, of the affronted Spirit of Europe crying aloud in the room:

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"FORM THE WAGONS INTO A CIRCLE!"

Stanford Montagu Rhodes' chuckle was elegant, cool and diplomatic. "Very good, Mr. Aster! 'Form the wagons into a circle!' The scout or wagon master's traditional cry to the wagon train as the Indians attack. Very good. But, perhaps, considering the circumstances, just a trifle — shall we say? — *gauche*. But I take your point. I understand your objection. No, Mr. Aster, and you others, never fear: this is no Confrontation. No symbolic scalps are being sought here today. This meeting is sought only and entirely in a spirit of amity and forgiveness. These great chiefs, these legendary men and living legends (for such they are), have come on no antagonistic errand. They are not what are called 'Hostiles' in your movies. They want only to smoke the Pipe of Peace with you. But I wonder ... would it be possible for our guests to be seated?"

It was. — With many apologies, some shifting about and the requisition of folding chairs from the stack in the corner, it was soon done. Rhodes seated himself next to me — which meant that I would see him as he should always be seen: in profile. The six chiefs were lined in a row on the other side of him. They placed their weapons on the floor by their feet; I saw Geronimo divest himself of that mysterious pack and drop it with a heavy thump beside his chair.

When we were all settled, Phil said, "I wonder if I might ask a question." And then, to Rhodes: "I'm not a member but a visitor, a corporation lawyer not a writer. So I don't ask this question as a challenge, which I would have no right to make, but simply to satisfy my personal curiosity. You introduced these gentlemen as Tammany, Sitting Bull, Geronimo, and so on. Those are famous names ... but aren't the original possessors of those names all dead?"

Rhodes, smiling, inclined his head. "As a corporation lawyer, you are no doubt familiar with the term, 'fictive entity.' Well, for the sake of convenience, I hope you will accept my friends as 'fictive entities.'" There was, perhaps, something just a trifle fatuous about the man: he seemed to find his own remarks so much more amusing than anyone else would.

My friend was still puzzled but politely dropped the subject.

Herb Aster recited to Phil, in a stage whisper plainly heard throughout the room:

> "Keep that buffalo out of my garden,
> "Keep that Indian out of my parlor.

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"Here they come again, saying they won't pardon
"Us for causing their slaughter and squalor."

"Herb," said Phil, with a touch of exasperation, "I'm afraid I have to agree with Mr. Rhodes. At some other time I might find your doggerel amusing, but at the moment it seems very tasteless."

Herb drew back, his face frozen with resentment. "A bit of impromptu verse," he said, "just thought I'd throw it out." It would be some time before he forgave Phil that terrible word "doggerel."

Rhodes ignored the interruption. "Gentlemen, when I said a moment ago that our Indian visitors wanted only to smoke the Pipe of Peace with you, I was speaking literally, not metaphorically. Here is the pipe," taking from Sitting Bull the pipe with the long stem, "and here, in this fascinating pouch, is the tobacco." And Pontiac, Chief of the Ottawa, placed upon the table a leather pouch, on which were wrought many cryptic designs in red and blue, and undid the string. Inside was a dark brown crumbly vegetative matter which even in this raw state exhaled a distinctive odor, the essence, as it seemed to me, of vacant lots and back yards.

"That," said Sandy Burr, "looks like what we used to call Indian tobacco when we were kids. It grew wild everywhere. We thought if a cow ate some, it would go mad."

Rhodes smiled. Taking from the pouch a large pinch of the brown matter, he tamped it into the bowl of the pipe. And Logan, Chief of the Mingo, produced, seemingly from nowhere, a clump of dried grass and two small objects which proved to be a flint and a piece of steel. Placing the grass in a dry saucer — the busboys had cleared the table but had left behind the coffee cups and saucers — he struck the flint and steel together vigorously, ignoring Peter's outstretched hand offering a Ronson. Scattering sparks upon the grass, he blew them into flame, touched a blazing stalk to the contents of the pipe that Rhodes had ready in his mouth.

Rhodes inhaled deeply, twice, and emitted twin streams of white smoke from his nostrils. He passed the pipe to Tecumseh, who sat next to him, saying as he did so, "Tradition demands that every man wishing peace in his heart and desiring to express that wish should take one or two deep drafts and then pass the pipe to his neighbor."

And so the pipe was passed around the table, clockwise. Which meant that I, sitting to the right of Rhodes, would be the last recipient of it. Which gave me some time to

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think about his reply to Phil's question. Evidently, what he meant was that those names had been assumed for rhetorical purposes ... which would seem to mean that, despite his disclaimer, he did have some "activist" purpose in bringing the Indians to beard us in our very lair. Or was he doing it for the publicity? But if that were so, I wondered, glancing first at the bar door and then at the restaurant portal — if that were so, where were the newsmen and the television cameras?

But the doors remained shut, suggesting, as shut doors must inevitably do, the retention of secrets ... and, since they *can* be opened, possibly disturbing disclosures.

The Indians took their two puffs solemnly, and when the pipe reached the first paleface, Louis Love, he took his solemnly too, in imitation. Naturally, I was reminded of the passing around of a "joint" at a party, but if anyone else was reminded of that, he didn't mention it; everyone accepted the pipe. I am sure that no one would have wanted to do anything that would offend our visitors or suggest that he had less than good will towards the Indian. Luke Long and Bret Newhart were unaffectedly impressed by the solemnity of the occasion. Sam Clemenceau was grave. The high-school teacher was speechless. Sandy Burr took a generous puff or two. John Peters feigned solemnity, puffed, and handed the pipe to Coach Wainwright; and his friend doled himself out two small white cloudlets, with his usual show of doing something rather droll. I saw Herb Aster sneering around the stem of the pipe — "How very unsanitary!" — but he took his puffs nevertheless. Phil smoked the Pipe of Peace and handed the thing to me. Ah, at last! I inhaled two very deep drafts, rather relishing the picturesqueness of the scene in which I found myself. In short, we all smoked and enjoyed the situation. And the white fumes from the pipe, our mouths, nostrils, and I suppose our lungs, rose in wispy, thready layers towards the ceiling. A smoke-filled room, indeed — and yet none of us gasped for breath, coughed or fanned away the fumes. On the contrary, the whole atmosphere was somehow pleasant; an air of good fellowship pervaded the room.

The pipe went around again. Coach Wainwright had been clearing his throat for the last minute or so; evidently, he had something of some importance to say. I saw Peters slyly watching him. Peters — Wainwright are a team of sorts. Like Laurel — Hardy. Peters is small, bespecta-

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cled, intensely alert; Wainwright, called "Coach" since his college football days, is large, grave, amiable and, if he only knew it, humorless. But he doesn't know it. He frequently trots out heavy, slow-moving jokes, which his friend invariably "tops." "I'm part Indian," he got out at last, to our guests across the table from himself, apparently wishing to say something kind to them. "Pawnee. On my mother's side."

Peters turned to him, as if startled and excited. "Pawnee? You're part Pawnee? Why — *I'm a Pawnee!*"

Wainwright stared, incredulously. "*You* are a Pawnee?"

"Yes!" cried Peters, half rising from his chair in his excitement and scrabbling at Wainwright's lapel. "Yes — everything I have is in hock! Ha! ha! ha! Get it? — 'Pawnee; *noun*: one whose goods are in pawn.'"

Phil whispered in my ear, "I wonder if that tobacco isn't an intoxicant of some sort."

I said, "Oh, Peters always acts like that."

But Phil's question had suggested itself to others. Louis Love, at the far end of the table, gave louder voice to it. "Say, is this stuff peyote, maybe? I feel awfully lightheaded."

Luke Long was at that moment puffing speculatively at the pipe. "Its effect," he mused, "is something like marijuana... but it doesn't have the color of marijuana."

"Gentlemen!" The cultivated voice — that is to say, the ripened, perhaps the overripe, voice — of Stanford Montagu Rhodes floated through the haze. "Gentlemen, it is none of those things, neither peyote, marijuana, Indian tobacco or loco weed. But you are right, it is an intoxicant drug. Calm yourselves —" For there had been several gasps and gapes of surprise, and Sam Clemenceau had pushed back his chair as if to rise, his short grey hair and mustache bristling with indignation. "Calm yourselves, gentlemen. The drug is absolutely harmless, though some find it mildly hallucinatory. And you need not fear that the police will come crashing in. This tobacco is not yet on the proscribed list, nor is it ever likely to be. It is rarer than rare: the world's entire supply is in that pouch hanging from Chief Tammany's belt. If you will be patient, we will explain. Chief Tecumseh!"

And the Indian who sat immediately to his left arose to his moccasined feet and held up his hand for silence, which was, for the most part, granted him.

"It is Tecumseh, Chief of the Shawnee, who speaks. I would that I could address you from my throne in the crotch of a tree, but the tree is felled. The very forest in which

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the tree was one is felled. Gone! Gone! All gone! Where are the camps of my people? Where are their wigwams? Where is Weehawken? Teaneck? Yonkers? Manhattan? Gone! All gone! Gone before the hordes of the White Man pouring in endless waves from across the Great Water. But, enough! I came not to upraise the tomahawk, but to bury it. All is as the Great Spirit has ordained." And, spreading his arms wide, he raised his face to the ceiling and intoned in a voice vibrant with grief: "*It is enough that the arrows fit exactly in the wounds they have made.*"

Phil was surprised — amused — perplexed. "Chief Tecumseh has read Kafka!"

Stanford Montagu Rhodes turned towards Phil. His right eye gleamed. "Yes — he's quite a literary character!"

And Techumseh went on: "I do not lightly invoke the name of Manitou, the Great Spirit." No, not lightly perhaps, but he invoked it often enough in what followed. He uttered the names Manitou and The Great Spirit, The Great Spirit and Manitou, over and over, weaving them back and forth through some story he told until they began to sound in my ears like a litany he was chanting ... chanting as the pipe again floated about the table. Love and Long took only perfunctory puffs; Newhart was greedy; Sam Clemenceau put the instrument from him with the back of his hand; it reached me with remarkable abruptness ... and I took the shares of those who had not smoked.

Tecumseh told a story. Curiously enough, I didn't hear the story, I saw it. I saw a great Indian, the Ideal Indian, painted all of water colors, sitting in a tent that was not a tent but the sky. I saw him draw pictures of deer, bison, fish birds and men upon a piece of white bark, saw him breathe upon those drawings the smoke from his pipe, saw them come to life. And as this pure Indian Spirit bent over the figures, depositing the deer and the bison on the forested and grassy floor of his tent, dropping the fish into blue streams that flowed from between green hills at his feet, I saw one of the men-figures stealthily tiptoe behind him and snatch some of the tobacco from his pouch and a blazing brand from the fire; saw him scamper away, with each of these trophies held at arm's-length from his body, like a stick figure in an animated cartoon. The ludicrous antics of this pip-squeak Prometheus made me chuckle aloud. Phil nudged me ... and I jerked myself upright and looked around. Everyone was intent upon Tecumseh. I hyperventilated a few times, and my head cleared wonderfully, just

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in time to hear his concluding words:

"— and thus the tobacco was passed down from father to son. Here it is. It is a great gift, for in smoking it you partake of the breath of the Great Spirit. But I fear that I speak in a tongue that you do not understand. Our friend and guide will make my meaning plain."

And Rhodes rose as Tecumseh sat. "Yes, fellow writers, I have deceived you, but it was all in a good cause, for I have conferred upon you this evening an inestimable gift. The gift of creation. Ah, you already have *that*, you say. True, but not like this. Believe me, all your previous works will now seem to you puny things in comparison. For this is the true tobacco of invention, the pipe of creation, the smoke of inspiration, the ashes of ... well, I don't know what the ashes are the ashes of. But anyone who smokes this tobacco, first smoked by the Great Spirit, will find that he can imitate that Great Spirit in little, for whatever he tells of or writes as he smokes will come into existence. Whatever he envisions will become visible to others. His creations will come to life and breathe and move. You laugh, yes —" although none of us had actually laughed; we had merely exchanged glances and uncertain smiles about the table. "Laugh, if you wish, but I know whereof I speak." And here Rhodes himself laughed, a laugh such as Ronald Coleman would never have laughed: knowing, conceited, arrogant, abominably voluptuous. It wasn't so much a laugh as orchestrated gloating. "Yes, I have good evidence that it works, and in my sense of godlike powers, I have been overcome by an impulse of generosity, or of recklessness perhaps, and have decided to share this tremendous boon with you, as my contribution to your evening's entertainment. You shall discover the delights of literal creation. You may become fathers without wives or midwives, gods without — or so let us hope — opposing devils." He turned. "Geronomo!"

And the mystery of what it was Geronimo had in that pack was revealed, for, on his opening it, we saw a bushel of paper, as well as pens, pencils, tablets, even a small typewriter: an Olivetti Lettera 32, I think. The pens and paper were quickly passed around to all those about the table, and we were requested to write whatever we would.

By now several of us were grinning ... for we at last appreciated the joke. "Very good, Mr. Rhodes," said Sandy Burr. "I applaud you. This is by far the most original evening's entertainment that any new member has afforded

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us. And audience participation, too! But ... you want us to write after having made some of us slightly drunk. Perhaps you intend that we should really earn our name, The Writers of the Purple Page?"

One of the guys at the other end of the table had a question. "Won't people be rather surprised at finding themselves suddenly in existence?"

"Really, Mr. Newhart," replied Rhodes, "I'm rather surprised at you. Any college sophomore can tell you that all of us, the entire world, may have come into existence but a second ago. Naturally, our written histories and other records would have come into existence during the same second. Any single person, such as yourself, springing suddenly into life would arrive on this scene with his inner portmanteau stuffed with a lifetime of memories. And if you should see someone suddenly appear beside you, I'm sure you'd very quickly convince yourself he'd always been there — unless it was *you* who had brought him into existence. The mind does not easily accept discontinuities. By the bye," he went on, looking around, "please, don't anyone write about God. That creates problems of priority and precedence."

This evoked more laughter.

"What puzzles me," resumed Sandy Burr, "is that I don't see how you can possibly justify the build-up you've given us — this business of characters coming to life. How can you make good on that?"

"That, sir," said Stanford Montagu Rhodes in a consciously portentous, even melodramatic, tone, "remains to be seen."

We all wrote.

The sound of scratching pens, of rustling sheets of paper, replaced that of clattering coffee cups and chattering voices. I saw heads, shoulders, bent to their tasks, expressions amused or bemused; one or two persons very serious; one or two anxious, as if they were being subjected to a test and felt that they might not come at all well out of it. We all worte. Except the Indians, who looked on with expressions stoical and enigmatic. Except Rhodes, who looked on with a knowing, secret and proprietary smile. Except Phil, who pleaded that he wasn't a writer and couldn't do justice to any subject. "As a lawyer," he said, with a smile, "I'm more at home with briefs than shorts. I wouldn't acquit myself well. And, besides ...."

He left the sentence hanging, but I knew what he meant. Phil is resolutely unsuperstitious and refuses to play along with anything smacking of the occult, the mystical, the irrational. He carries

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this further than any other man I know: he won't tell even the prettiest girl what his "sign" is.

I wrote. I had hesitated a moment or so, trying for an appropriate subject .... and thought of Belle Fontaine.

My fans are well familiar with Belle Fontaine. She is the heroine of two of my novels, appeared in my movie *Seven Notches to Glory* (played by Estelle Sommers, who, though very pretty, is not quite right for the part) and in one of my television scripts. She is my feminine ideal; I might say, my muse. She is five feet two, has eyes of blue, has long blond hair and a clear complexion. She is very shapely and pretty, but she's also intelligent, lively, musical, playful, sentimental, tender, much given to laughter, and able to take care of herself. If I could bring her to life, ah! that would be something! To incarnate that ideal beauty — *that* (I repeat) would be something.

And so I bent to the task. You will understand, of course, that I didn't really believe, despite the two Tom Collinses and the pipe, that I was going to bring her to life, like Pygmalion, or, more aptly yet, cause her to spring into existence from my thoughts, as Athena did from the brow of Jove. No, I didn't expect that any more than you would have done in the same situation. I simply went along with the thing for the fun of it — just as you would have done.

And so I wrote a few brief lines, describing Belle as alive in modern Los Angeles. And looking for me. With longing.

We all wrote.

"May I ask, Mr. Wainwright," said Stanford Montagu Rhodes, "what it is you are writing about?"

"Certainly." Coach was bearing down so ponderously upon his composition that he didn't bother to look up. "I'm writing about a bear. A grand old majestic bear, stalwart and brave, the survivor of a long struggle with mankind."

"I see. And where is this bear to be found?"

"In the High Sierras," said Coach, still writing.

"Ah! And you, Mr. Peters," went on Rhodes, "you seem to be writing something amusing."

"So-so. It's a story about a war between the Cattlemen and the Sheepmen."

"Oh?" Rhodes' flat monosyllable expressed my own reaction to that. "Sort of old hat, isn't it?"

"Well ... no. You see, these are literally *Cattle*-men — their male calves are called *Cow*-boys — and they're fighting a wide-ranging war against another species, the *Sheep*-men."

Rhodes was silent a moment. Then: "Good Heavens, man! They would be monsters!" He squirmed

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in his seat. "Where ... where does this war take place?"

"On another planet."

Rhodes' chuckle expressed relief, as did the hand he touched to his forehead. He did it so well that it actually crossed my mind for a moment that he believed his own put-on. The guy was pretty good.

We all wrote. Except the acerb Herb. "This is the silliest goddamn thing," he grated. Phil looked at him. He looked at Phil. He smiled. "So you're not a writer?" The smile remained fixed as he shuffled the papers before him and poised his pen decisively. "I think I'll write a story about a guy who *is* a writer. Let's see ... what shall I call him? Now, what," he asked me, "is the name of your friend here? Joseph Hunter Phillips?" Phil and I exchanged a look; Herb had known Phil slightly for years and should know his name. "Well, I can't use that actual name, of course. I'll change it about a little. I'll make his first name 'Philip,' for obvious reasons. And his last, some variation on 'Hunter,' say ... some old occupational name. 'Fisher'? No. 'Miller'? Oh, *this* will do." And he wrote a name on the top sheet. "A little flat, just those two names alone. I'll give him three, like the writers at the turn of the century. Or like you, John Thames Rokesmith. For his middle name, Joseph? No ... some variation on that, I think. Ah, I have it! Weird! But it gives just that touch of strangeness that a good name should have. So he's a writer? But of what?" And that fixed smile widened into a grin that struck me as absolutely diabolical. "I know! I'll make him a writer of fantastic science stories. Ha, ha! He'll starve to death. But slowly."

Herb's moving finger wrote and, having writ, moved on. His pen seemed to be secreting some venomous dark substance which it left behind in delicate traceries upon the paper. His ligature was as thin as a strand of spider's web and, one might have thought, as sticky and entangling. He wrote a full page and began a second sheet; but as he went on, his pen became louder and more rasping, his hand moved more and more wildly, as if it were struggling free of the bonds of patience and restraint until, finally, he threw down the pen, clawed up the sheets, wadded them viciously into a ball, and threw them into a corner of the room with a curse, the strangest curse ever: *"Is Jane Fonda Peter, Henry?"* The remark was such a *non sequitur* — apparently, it was meant as an insult to our visitors (Jane Fonda having championed Indian causes) and perhaps also, somehow, to Phil — that, uttered with that extreme bitterness, it seemed not only inane but almost insane. All other pens

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were lifted from the sheets of paper, or rested upon them; everyone stared; and in the hush that followed there was plainly heard in the room a sinister *tick — tick — tick*, as mysterious as that ticking sound one hears in the wall by one's bed at four in the morning, as ominous as the ticking of a time bomb.

It was the sound made by the brutally wadded sheets of paper in the corner as they arthritically unfolded.

At this moment there was, gratefully, an interruption. The door leading to the restaurant proper opened, and an old woman tottered in, the oldest woman I have ever seen. I doubt that I ever before saw such a wreck ambulatory. She lurched towards us, seemed to be on the verge of pitching forward on her face, but caught herself with her cane — stood facing us, weaving from side to side, precariously propped, a ruin shored by a single stick. We all watched her with an almost painful suspense.

"Can we help you, madam?" inquired Sandy, solicitously.

"I'm looking for John," she cried, in a single sustained note, as if in desperate need.

There were of course three of us named John: Peters, Wainwright and myself. Peters popped up from his chair, grinning like a cabaret M.C.: "Will just any John do?"

"No, no!" Again, the desperate, the almost intolerable, need. "I'm looking for *the* John!"

There was laughter and a broken chorus of voices: "Out that door and down the hall to your right!"

"Thank you!" And she staggered foward, her cane stuttering against the floor, and out the bar door.

I didn't join in the laughter. Not as first. For it had struck me (and in rather a tender spot too) that my Belle Fontaine had been a young girl in the 1880s, and if she were still alive she would be lucky to be in as good a shape as that old woman. Then I laughed, crossed out some of the lines I had written — there was, coincidentally, a crash from offstage and some more laughter, speculative and ashamed, from about the table — and added other lines to the effect that Belle was a young girl now, alive and well in Los Angeles. And I thought it best to moderate a little the intensity of her need for me. I felt a trifle absurd writing that ... but then Phil (as I confirmed with a glance) was skeptical enough for both of us; dividing the labor with him, I could afford to be playfully credulous.

The door to the bar opened and another female form appeared.

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When the door to the bar opens, it opens upon a scene of phosphorescent darkness, of muffled greens and shadowy reds; and this girl burst forth from that dark cavern like a brilliant Venus from a submarine grotto. She was of the same sex as the ancient crone who had just passed out through that door, but otherwise what a difference! The principle of femaleness had been represented in that other in an abstractly pedantic, a dry-as-dust way; here it was embodied forth with full particulars. The other had been the dried husk; here was the fruity pulp, the succulent marrow. I have never seen a creature so feminine. Or so beautiful. She glowed, she quite reduced the Indians to sublunary creatures; I saw at once that they were fashioned of the earth, like myself, but she —!

Her blond, almost yellow hair, slightly curled and ringleted, fell to her slender waist: I saw the eye of Sitting Bull quite entranced by it, as well it might be. Her skin glowed milky white and peach pink, a good deal of it being exposed to view, for she wore a very scanty costume: an armless black blouse, leaving her shoulders and arms bare, a short flaring skirt with ruffles, black net stockings, high-heel shoes. She tripped towards me — towards us, that is — lightly, her blue eyes sparkling with gayety. I felt a thrill that was more than physical, more than social — it was positively superstitious. For I knew her. I knew her the moment I saw her. I had known her for years, it seemed; I hoped I always would.

"Gentlemen" — she had a voice of thrilling sweetness — "would you like to order any drinks?"

For this Aphrodite, this paragon, this vision and ideal was, as you may have guessed, a cocktail waitress. But that was all right, wasn't it? The heroine of my books had been a dance-hall girl.

Several orders were given. Profane orders for martinis, Budweisers, Scotch-and-waters.

As for me, I simply stared, unable to look away, unable to speak. I saw her light professional eye pass over me and come back, look again at my ludicrous awkward speechless staring. I knew what an idiotic spectacle I presented. I must have looked like a giant toad, eyes bulging, mouth open, ready to spring forward and upon her. And she, in turn, was staring at me — at first with puzzlement, which was understandable enough, and then with something that looked very much like (although it couldn't be) surprise and pleasure.

"Why," she said, "it's *you*!"

"Yes," I heard my voice say, sounding in my ears as if it were speaking from over my left

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shoulder — in other words, as if I were a ventriloquist's dummy. "I don't doubt it. I cling to that."

"You're Johnny aren't you? Johnny ... Rokesmith?"

"Yes."

"And you recognize me. But perhaps you've forgotten my name? It's —"

"*Belle Fontaine*!" My voice supplied the name, quickly, and with an almost metallic touch (as upon a steel guitar) and as if it were anxious to get the name out before she could speak it.

She laughed. "You *do* remember! And it's been so long! Seven or eight years, at least. I'm flattered. But how'd you know about the Fontaine part? It was Murphy when you last saw me. The man who changed my name —"

My heart dropped, sickeningly.

"— wanted to call me Belle Starr, but I thought that a bit much. We finally compromised on Fontaine. How is good old Brooklyn High, I wonder. You know, I glimpsed you once or twice when I was home on vacations, but never had a chance to speak to you."

I had glanced at Phil when she confessed to the name, as if to re-establish my orientation to what was rational and sane. And did so. The sight of his calm and reasonable face somehow enabled me to gather up and bring together various little disjointed pieces of meaning.

I had not, after all, invented Belle Fontaine. At least, I hadn't invented the girl. I had known her in high school. Belle Murphy. She had been a freshman when I was already a hulking senior. I had had a crush on her but had been too shy to speak to her. I had followed her home one day after school and had stood for an hour across the street from her building, trying to guess whether any of the persons going in and coming out were her father, mother or brothers; she had seen me and had waved to me from her window, and I had crept away with a burning face. I graduated. A few years later, she graduated and left town for a girl's college in ... yes, Bellefontaine, Indiana. Strange that I should have forgotten that. I must have realized when I first created my heroine that I had modeled her on an actual girl. But my proprietary pride in my creation and my belief that I would never see that pretty girl again (especially after I had moved from the East to the West Coast) had caused her image to become assimilated entirely to my imagination. I had forgotten what a large part memory had played in the idea of her.

And here she was in the flesh, transferred, as it had seemed to me for one mad moment, from my imagination to reality. She had

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come to "Hollywood," I supposed, to break into show business and, like thousands of other aspirants, had taken whatever job she could in the meantime. As for the business of the last name, that had been a coincidence — not such a terribly unlikely one, really, considering the associations.

"I'll see you later, Johnny," said Belle and hid herself from my sight in her dark cave. I turned back to the table with some satisfaction, for I knew that I would be seeing her again when she came back with the drinks. But, despite my glowing complacency, I saw that the recognition that this had been a moment of some worth to us had been shared not only by Belle and myself but, in various ways, by several others at this end of the table. I picked up on Phil's skeptical, speculative amusement — he was too familiar with my writings not to be struck by the incident — and on John Peters' humorous lasciviousness; if I had taken him more seriously, I would have punched him in the mouth. But most startling of all, or so I would have thought if I had taken the time to think about it, was Herb Aster's clairvoyant but derisive recognition that this was *my* Belle Fontaine.

But I didn't take the time. When Belle had introduced herself, I saw Sandy Burr's grey eye rest for a moment upon us, an eye abstracted and wistful. He had been perplexed, I think, as to what to write about, doodling with his pencil, or, rather, lightly sketching some horses in a desert setting; but now I saw his expression change. He shuffled his sheets, picked up his pen, touched it to the paper. I saw the pen tremble ... and in his face an expression that I might have thought was fear if there had been anything of which to be afraid. He touched the pen to the paper again, resolutely, and wrote. He wrote two or three lines ... and paused. He showed me his white hair, his near-sighted eyes being bent closely over the paper. His eyes were not visible to me, but the lines he had written were, and I saw to my surprise that they were blurring, running ... being washed out by drops of water. Of course. He was writing about his wife who had died half a year ago. No wonder his pen had trembled! He had had the grimly fanciful thought, "If I could bring anyone to life by writing, I would write of her." He was, in a moment of provisionally assumed insanity, trying to resurrect his wife with his pen. (But what terrible things I touch upon here. It seems cruel to record, or even to imagine, such things. Creator Spirit, forgive me!) He began again, wrote some lines that were not washed away, then carefully folded the sheet —

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nothing, I think, could have induced him to have wadded it up, as Herb had done his — and tucked it away in his breast pocket.

The door from the restaurant opened, and a woman about sixty came in. She hurried around the table to where Sandy sat. He stared. "Lionel!" she cried, "I'm Edna. I couldn't stand it any longer — I had to tell you. I'm alive. You remember that quarrel we had eight months ago when I stormed out of the house? I never came back. That was Ruby, my twin sister, who showed up on Monday. She'd always loved you and I let her take my place and I went off to Hawaii. She died, not me. I won't bother you now, Lionel, since you're presiding. I just thought I'd mention it. I'll wait for you at home, dear." And she turned and hurried out the same door, closing it behind her.

Lionel, or Sandy, still stared, stared at the closed door and then about the room, like a man rudely awakened from a dream. We all stared at him and at each other. All that is, except the Indians, who might have been sitting as models for their old-fashioned drugstore effigies. All, except Stanford Montagu Rhodes, who seemed to be congratulating himself on something. Sandy said nothing. He shook his head, yawned, flexed his shoulders, and picking up his pencil, resumed his former activity, sketching horses among sage brush. A kind of embarrassment kept anyone from saying anything to him on such a subject; and, moreover, the ... well, the Visitation ... had happened so abruptly and it was, so to speak, so *disconnected,* as well as so fantastic, that we weren't sure a moment later that it had happened at all.

The door from the bar opened, letting in a gust of western music. I seemed to see it open, even though I was looking away, towards Sandy, at the time. When I did glance in that direction, with as much casualness as I could muster up (for I felt that I could do without the jokes, observations and silent speculations of the others), I saw, to my horror, that it wasn't Belle bringing in the drinks, but Lou. "The lady known as Lou," as she is habitually and tiresomely called, is our regular cocktail waitress: a woman about 40, with a shrewd eye and a rough-and-ready humor, one of those loud-talking and aggressive women whom everyone laughingly says is "quite a gal!" and "a good sport" and secretly rather dislikes. She passed around the drinks, collected the money, made change and the usual small jokes. I intercepted her at the door on her way out.

"Where's Miss Fontaine?"

She turned on me a look that

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was amused and knowing. "Belle? She's gone."

"Gone ...?"

"Yeah. A customer pinched her fanny and she slapped him and spilled his drink. He was a guy Leo owes money to and he squawked, but loud, so Leo fired her."

She waited with a sidelong look and an arched eyebrow for my next question — which was a while in coming, because I had a good deal of indignation to choke down. "I wonder if Leo would give me her address?"

"Ha! Not a chance, Buster! Leo doesn't give out the addresses of us girls. That's an iron-clad rule. You're out of luck. But if you're hard-up, why don't you try Shirley, the cashier? I think you'll find she answers your needs."

I turned away, trying to hide my disappointment and mortification from her contemptuous eye. Oh, well, I sighed ... Belle had been too good to be true, anyway. Had I lost anything, really? Perhaps not. She had glimmered into my life like a moonbeam, and then had glimmered out. Moonbeams weren't very substantial. Had she even been real? I wondered, thinking also of that woman who had accosted Sandy and disappeared. I had had — we had all had — a bit too much to drink and smoke. I found my way back to my seat.

And all this while (that is, for the last several minutes), Herb Aster had been scratching away at a fresh sheet of paper with a pertinacity that would have done him credit if it had been in a good cause. The sound of his pen — thin, dry, rasping and irritating — was like the very voice of his bitterness. It fell silent at last. He let drop the pen with an expression as near to self-satisfaction as I think he could achieve and with a sly glance at the Indians.

I was unable to restrain my curiosity. By craning my neck a little, I was able to read, upside down, the title he had given the composition: "Six Little Indians." Six little Indians ...? What had Herb wrought? For I of course remembered the nursery rhyme in which ten little Indians are bumped off — eliminated — one by one: "... and then there were none." Could it be that Herb had given vent to some murderous fantasy? Well, what if he had?

But my heart began to beat, apprehensively, as if it knew something I didn't. I looked around — at the bar door, at the restaurant door. Both remained shut and silent, as stalwart and inexpressive as Indian sentinels. I sighed with relief, looked back at the others, reached for my derelict coffee cup — and received a jolt which sent cold dregs of coffee splashing on the tablecloth. I thought it was an

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explosion. But, no: the fire-exit door leading to the street had burst inward with a loud bang, and a man now strode into the room and towards the bright light about the table. All eyes were instantly fastened on him and with good reason — for his stride was purposive, his face determined, and he carried in his right hand a long rifle of antique design. I suppose we all felt at the sight of the gun a kind of conjectural alarm; I caught a fleeting inward glimpse of large illegible headlines. This man was dressed entirely in buckskins, with ornamental fringes or strips of leather hanging from his chest, knees and elbows. On his feet he wore what must have been leather-stockings, and on his head a backwoodsman's hat, a broad-brimmed, low-crowned hat, fixed with uncompromising flatness on his head. Heavy blond hair escaped from within the tight confines of the hat and spilled about his shoulders.

And I saw that our phlegmatic guests, the Indian chiefs, were staring upon him with an undisguised intensity of interest, such as they had not bestowed either upon us, the Writers of the Purple Page, or on any of our other visitors. And no wonder. For he was a man of their world, a recognizable denizen if not a kindred spirit. He might have been a trapper, a scout, a guide, a buffalo hunter, or any combination of those things. But there was a detail that seized and absolutely gripped their interest, for there hung suspended from his belt two black shocks of — hair, apparently, exactly like that shock of hair hanging from Sitting Bull's waist, though not of its color.

He and the chiefs of the six Indian nations regarded one another: they with a stoical and impassive gaze, he with a hard and insolent stare ... and as he came closer to the pale of light about the table, pausing some six or seven feet from us, I saw his eyes. Good God! I had never seen such eyes! They were round and unblinking — which wouldn't have recommended them to me if they had been otherwise normal; but these had red irises, as if suffused with blood. Red, not blue, hazel or brown. His eyes alone made him absolutely inhuman.

But surprised as we all were, we stolid Indians and we justly named Palefaces, thrown off balance as we all were, and as I was, I nevertheless managed to take in that the most surprised, the most staggered of us all was Herbert Aster. He was leaning forward at a precarious angle from his chair on the other side of Phil and was staring with a totally unself-conscious astonishment at the intruder.

A dead silence. And the

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intruder spoke. "My name," he said, "is Winchester Remington Colt."

There was a startling chair-crashing sound, as sharp and loud as the report of a gun. And Herb Aster pitched forward to the floor, as if he were shot.

Phil and I bent over the fallen man, picked him up and put him back in his chair, in which he sprawled limply, his bowed, if unbloodied head drooping forward. "Who ...?" he managed.

The man who called himself Winchester Remington Colt stood looking on with a contemptuous smile. "Sorry to break up the powwow, but I have business here. Not with you, my countrymen, but with your red-skinned friends." He shifted the aim of his blood-red eyes to them. "Do you know me?"

"We know you," they replied, in perfect chorus, "as the mountain lion knows the bear."

"If you know me, you know my purpose. You know what I seek here."

"We know that too," intoned the Red Men. "We see it: it stands by you so."

"I," said he, "am Winchester Remington Colt, the slayer of Mocmohoc. Men call me 'Indian Killer.' Man and boy, I have spent my life on the noiseless trail, ever since that day at Bloody Ground, Kentucky. I have come far to track you to this lair, but track you I did. This room," he said, looking about, "swims in blood." As well it might, when seen through such eyes as his! "Vengeance!" he shouted, raising a fist ceilingward. "'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord!'"

"Then leave to the Lord," said Logan, "what is his. Why should you seek vengeance? I sought vengeance and never found it. My wife and children were killed in the Yellow River massacre at the very hour as I sat at the Treaty Table with the Whites and smoked the Pipe of Peace. I burned with grief and rage all the rest of my life. I killed many whites, and at the end I felt no satisfaction. Now I rage no more. I sit again at the long table and care not whether there be treachery or no."

"No, no treachery!" cried Luke Long, much moved.

"There has been much treachery," said Winchester Remington Colt, "much — from the Indian. These things you speak of, Red Man — broken treaties, wrongs done by the Whites, these I have not seen, and words carry no weight against what I have seen with my own eyes. My farm burnt to the ground. My brother tortured and murdered. My wife raped and murdered. My babe's brains dashed out against the wall of my log cabin." His voice was thick with

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congealed grief and rage as he recited this catalog of horror; I was embarrassed with awe. "I have taken a vow," he said, "to leave no Red Man standing. Colt is my name and Terror is my epitaph."

And he raised that long rifle to his shoulder, his left hand sliding along the barrel, his right touching the trigger.

There was a great clattering as everyone pushed back their chairs and struggled to their feet. One or two chairs were knocked over. Words, cries, were flung haphazardly through the air. The schoolteacher slipped beneath the table. A plate, two glasses, fell and shattered; a spoon was snatched up and held as a weapon. The Indians rose, gravely and without undue haste, to face the accusing and the judging barrel. Their weapons lay at their feet.

Tableau: the grotesque avenger with his raised rifle; the Indians brave and defiant; the pale-faced Writers of the Purple Page in various attitudes about (and in one case under) the table.

"Logan would not turn his heel to save his life," said the Chief of the Mingo. "Who is there to mourn for Logan? Not one."

"*Tira, Gringo*!" cried Geronimo, showing the slayer his broad bare chest. "*Yo no tengo miedo*!"

But before anyone else could speak, before the resentful finger could whiten on the trigger, Phil stepped forward, between the Indians and the avenger. The long barrel of the rifle touched his chest.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded. "What is this atrocity story you're telling? What century do you think this is? Nothing like that has happened in a hundred years now!"

These words were followed by a shocked silence. They were like a dash of ice water in our faces, so suddenly did they recall us to reality. My God, yes! This was Hollywood, 1974. It was almost like that moment near the end of *Through the Looking Glass* when Alice cries, "You're nothing but a pack of cards!" and sends her tormentors scattering through the air. Almost ... but not quite. The relief we felt was considerably qualified by that iron rifle barrel touching Phil's chest. And I was still conscious of those blood-red eyes.

Curiously enough, our Indian visitors were not all that grateful for having been so abruptly pulled back to earth. "You, sir," said Pontiac, "belong to the world of Prose." And I saw Stanford Montagu Rhodes smile upon the Indian with an indulgent irony.

Tecumseh sought to restore the madness. "For some men," said he, "time has no existence."

On this point the Avenger and

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his intended victims were as one. "For some men," repeated Winchester Remington Colt, "time has no existence. The massacre of my family might have happened yesterday."

"Yes," said Phil, quietly. "'Might have.' If it had happened at all, which it didn't."

Colt's face moved sluggishly; his voice smoldered with suppressed emotion. "Stranger, you shall not rob me of them a second time."

And I noticed what had escaped me before, that his vowels were heavy, his bearing a trifle too upright and sober. Our latest Messenger, in short, was more than a trifle drunk. As was I, for that matter ... something I was rather conscious of, for I felt that my legs were unsteady beneath me as I moved stealthily to my left, eclipsing Herb Aster. My idea was to throw myself upon Colt and bear him to the ground before he could fire. I could do it, if I could move quickly enough. I am 6'4" tall and weigh 280 pounds.

But before I could make my move, the door to the restaurant opened, and a voice — the familiar voice of Leo Leonetti, the owner — called out: "*There he is*!" And I saw black-uniformed shapes silhouetted against the blazing rectangle of the door, and in the same instant I saw Phil knock up the long barrel of the rifle with his forearm and heard and saw a thunderclap-sprouting of black and red ceilingward and saw a dense cloud of black smoke roil about the room — as from a photographer's powder flash in a western movie.

There were many coughs and gasps; and when the smoke cleared, I saw that Winchester Remington Colt was securely pinioned between two uniformed policemen and that his gun was in Phil's possession.

"Don't move, anyone!" cried Colt, in a tone of ferocious command. "Don't anyone dare take a step!"

"You're not giving orders anymore, buddy," said the older and bigger and darker of the two cops.

"It's my contact lens!" cried Colt. "One of my lenses dropped out!"

And I saw that his left eye no longer had that red iris. It was a mild hazel, pale as ashes after the fire has been extinguished. "Don't move," he pleaded, "or you'll step on it."

And Logan, Chief of the Mingo, who would not turn his heel to save his life, turned on his heel. There was a faint splintering sound from beneath his moccasined sole.

"Oh, no!" groaned Colt, in an agony of despair. He had lost not only his left lens, but his hat as well. It lay bottom up, brimming with shadow, on the floor near the

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black-booted feet of the policemen. He seemed to be in a transport of rage and bitterness. Wrenching his right arm free, he snatched his long yellow hair from his head and flung it at the Indians:

"*There — take it*!"

A second later, his hands were manacled behind him.

The sight of W. R. Colt's bald pate completely exposed the man. He was deflated, deglamorized, debunked. With his blood-red irises revealed as tinted contact lenses and without that ample head of hair, he seemed not the awesome figure of a minute before but a comic, ineffectual clown: middle-aged, bald, myopic, and tricked out in a preposterous costume.

"What's been going on here?" asked the younger policeman. He had instantly all the explanation he could handle. My own question as to how he and his partner had gotten here so quickly went unanswered in the confusion.

"You name is Winchester Remington Colt?" exclaimed the black cop. "Well, I'll be damned! Our names," with a glance at his comrade in arms, "are Smith and Wesson!"

And the two led the now-pathetic figure towards the restaurant door, but paused before going out through it. The black (Smith, no doubt) looked around with a satiric expression, his nose twitching, either disdainfully or experimentally. "Hey! Have you guys been smoking something you shouldn't? That's not gunsmoke and it's not cigarette smoke."

Sandy Burr answered for all. "No, officer, it is not either of those two things. But it's not marijuana. It's an Indian tobacco supplied by these men here, who —"

But as we all glanced in the direction of the Indians (that is, in the direction of the bar door), we saw that they were gone. The "Vanishing Red Man" had vanished silently away.

"— who have left us," Sandy finished, lamely. "Perhaps, Mr. Rhodes, you can explain?"

"No, I can't!" replied Rhodes, by no means taking the question in good part. "I am not accountable for them. I am the author of their being, true, but I am no more their master than a father is the master of his grown sons. They had lives of their own. If they choose to go, there is nothing I can do to stop them. Perhaps," he added, but without much conviction, "perhaps they have returned to their own hunting grounds."

"Yeah," murmured John Peters, "the William Morris Agency."

"So be it," said Sandy, turning again to the questioning policeman. "We have no explanation."

"Who cares? Let's go."

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As Colt was escorted from the room, he called back over his shoulder. "So long, Herb. Sorry I upset you."

I turned to Herb Aster. "You *know* him?"

Herb was still in a kind of shock. His voice trembled when he spoke; it had lost its native hue of bitterness. "I think so. He's very much like my brother-in-law, Roger Kinsman. I wrote a description just now of Winchester Remington Colt, Indian Killer. I didn't really expect him to materialize, you know," turning a supplicating glance upon me. "Not really. And in describing him, I described Roger — I often depict someone I know when I invent a character. Roger is a gun collector and a real right-wing nut, the bitterest man I've ever met, and he became even more bitter when he lost his bid to become president of the American Rifle Association — he was too reactionary for them. He brooded about that quite a bit. He drinks too, and all that brooding and drinking has made him half mad. Well, in describing Winchester Remington Colt, I simply used Roger, incorporating him into the character. And I guess that's why Colt materialized the way he did. Roger was simply swallowed up into him."

"Good grief!" said Phil. "Do you mean, Herb, that you believe Mr. Rhodes' story — his put-on? You think you can actually bring people into existence by writing about them?"

"Yes, I do believe that," said Herb simply, without the slightest trace of a sneer. "What else am I to believe? Take these happenings tonight, these people who showed up. Johnny's girlfriend, Belle Fontaine, and Sandy's wife — you wrote about her, didn't you, Sandy? Are we to call these 'coincidences'? And how am I to explain Winchester Remington Colt to myself? You might say Roger simply went to the Western Costume Co. on Hollywood Boulevard and bought himself that outfit, but why did he call himself by that name? A name I just dredged up from somewhere a little while ago. Why did he get himself up exactly as I described him in those sheets of paper on the table there? How did he know to come here? And so on. We've been creating people. That's the only conclusion I can come to. You know, I have the most terrible headache."

"It's all very puzzling, Herb," said Phil, "but I think we can find some more plausible explanation." He turned to Stanford Montagu Rhodes. "You say you *created* the Indians?" His manner was almost, if not quite, forensic.

Rhodes stood his ground. "Sir,

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I have confessed to that."

"And you brought them into existence by writing about them after smoking the tobacco? But how could you have smoked it before they brought it to you? And how could they have brought it to you before you created them? And, therefore, how could you have created them?"

Rhodes was silent a long moment. He had plenty of time to frame his reply; everyone patiently waited him out.

"The tobacco," he said, choosing his words carefully, "was brought to me by an Indian — not one of these, but another, a very old man, a half-breed, a desert rat, a visionary, called Country Tom. He was dying and wanted to pass the tobacco on to someone before he went. How he had gotten it I don't know, and he brought it to me for no other reason than that he had known and liked me when I was a child. Anyway, he brought it to me and told me that if I smoked some and then sat down and wrote, the person I wrote about would come into existence. So I smoked some and sat down and wrote."

"What did you write?"

Rhodes paused again, for some while, before answering. "*My autobiography.*"

"What!"

"Yes. I sat down and brought myself into existence."

"But, Good Lord, man, that isn't possible!"

"It *is* possible. You see, at the time I was barely in existence. I wasn't quite 'all there.' I wasn't a person, I was suffering from what is called 'an ego-dysfunction.' My 'I' had simply failed to come fully into existence. When Tom brought me the tobacco, I was in the psychopathic ward at Camarillo. 'Paranoid schizophrene' was the diagnosis, I believe."

I caught Phil's evanescent ray, confirming, in more general terms, the diagnosis.

"So I wrote my own biography. It may be," Rhodes added, smiling, "that I idealized myself somewhat. Be that as it may, I became whole. And sane. I *am* sane. More than that: not only does my ego exist, but it alone exists in its own right. Yes," looking around at the rest of us with a kind of modest megalomania, an arrogance muted by compassion for our makeshift and arbitrary souls, "I am the author of my own being. I am the only person in the world who can make that claim. I alone have a complete and isolate authenticity. But you will think me overweening." He turned to Phil. "I suspect, sir, that you think I somehow staged everything that happened tonight."

"I do think that. I think you contrived everything, including that

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cruel joke on Mr. Burr here."

"You are wrong. The only thing I contrived was the Indians, and I did that by sitting at my own typewriter and smoking some of the sacred tobacco with which I had filled the bowl of my homely brier pipe. Knowing that I was expected to supply some entertainment this evening, I thought I would give you something worthy of yourselves, and of me. I am not sure that I succeeded, but I flatter myself that three or four of you will never forget this night. But, enough. I shall demonstrate my human and social responsibility by going to look for my six little Indians. They may need a guide through the wilderness of this city. And, besides ... they have that pouch of my tobacco."

And he walked out through the restaurant door, turning towards the street. A moment later he reappeared. "Good heavens! It just struck me: I am an author in search of six characters! Pirandello, eat your heart out! Rather good, don't you think? No? Then, permit me: With a blush, I retire."

And he did retire ... but I have an idea he was incapable of blushing.

Leo Leonetti looked in from the bar. "Okay, fellows! Closing time. Sorry about that little disturbance, but then no one was hurt, thanks to one of my customers who was leaving the bar and saw that nut kick in the door and flagged down a prowl car passing just then." Sam Clemenceau and the schoolteacher exchanged knowing looks; Sam winked. "If any of you want a last drink, you'd better get it now at the bar, because I'm locking this door when I close it." Newhart and Love hastily took advantage of this offer. "You others can leave through the restaurant," went on Leo, "or through that broken exit door." And he withdrew his once leonine, now mangy head.

"Hah!" laughed Sam Clemenceau. "'Thanks to one of his customers!' That's what he thinks! It's thanks to Milton here!" And he proudly clapped his friend on the back. The schoolteacher looked about at us with a quiet and modest smile. "When Colt threatened to shoot the Indians," explained Sam, "Milton, with that presence of mind for which he is proverbial, slipped under the table and there, undisturbed by the furor, wrote out a few lines in which he created the cops and the guy who flagged them down — Warren Pumphrey is *his* name." And Sam, beaming, displayed a sheet of paper on which there were written, in a remarkably neat hand, a few lines, among which I detected the names Smith & Wesson. Phil reacted with what was evidently an involuntary spasm

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of the rictus muscles ... and turned away in disgust. "Let's go and celebrate, Milt," concluded the radiant Sam. "I know a place where they can't turn us out. Would you like to come along, Sandy?"

"No, thank you," said the wistful Lionel Burr. "I think there's someone waiting for me at home."

And the three went out the restaurant door together, Sam's arm about the shoulder of the mute but not so inglorious Milton.

In short, the evening was drawing to its close. There was the usual ragtag patchwork of last minute remarks, invitations and good-bys. Not a few of the remarks concerned Stanford Montagu Rhodes.

"My father," I heard Coach Wainwright say, with his usual heavy attempt at drollery, "was the author of *my* being."

Of course Peters couldn't resist that. "Oh? What did he use for a pen?"

Wainwright turned his eyes down majestically upon his friend. "And who," he said, "is the author of your being, do you know?" This was rather daring, if a trifle heavy-handed, for Peters never knew his father; but I gather he's not sensitive on the subject. "And you, yourself? Are you the author of anyone, Peters?" For Peters is not only not a son, he's also not a father. "Have you brought anyone into existence?"

But he had, as usual, underestimated his opponent. "May I remind you that there's a sense in which Peters may be said to be responsible for the existence of everyone?"

But the lumbering Coach was too slow to overtake that joke ... and gave it up. "Well, I'm off to the Sierras tomorrow morning on that hunting trip. So I won't be seeing you for a couple of weeks, John."

"Oh, but you will! Didn't your oldest tell you? I'm coming along." And he reached up to give his friend a patronizing pat on the shoulder. "I'm not going to let you face that bear alone."

"Bear?"

"The one you wrote about tonight ... remember?"

And they went out the door together.

I turned to Luke Long. "How come you didn't dash out with Newhart and Love? I've never seen you pass up a drink before?"

Luke shook his head. "I know — it's an epoch! But I think I've finally reached my capacity. Do you know what I wrote during our little Write-In?" He shame-facedly pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. "Listen to this: 'The lady known as Lou, as she is habitually and tiresomely called, is our regular cocktail waitress: a woman about 40 ...'

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and so on. It's simply a character sketch of Louise, whom we've all known for years! Can you beat that? What could I have been thinking of? I completely missed the idea that we were supposed to *invent* a character." An odd fancy passed through my head, like the last stray wisp of smoke from that pipe; but I was now too sober to mention it. "I think," said Luke, "I'll confine myself exclusively to liquid intoxicants from now on. Heigh-ho!" And he went out through the restaurant.

Our little group was now all dispersed, Phil and I and Herb stepping out directly through the fire-exit door into the harsh and smoky world of the street. Above us, the giant cowboy was dark, no longer twirling his neon lariat.

Herb's car was parked nearby at the curb. He turned a look on us as he unlocked the door, his face guarded and yet conveying to me a weary sadness beneath which his bitterness still heroically pulsed. He hid himself in the car; it crept away.

"Phil," I said, musing aloud, "it seems to me that you're the real Man of the Evening. Only you have kept your head while all about you others were losing theirs, et cetera."

But Phil didn't rise to this compliment. He loitered on the sidewalk, his thoughtful gaze directed downward. "I have to go back inside for a few minutes, Johnny. Would you mind waiting?"

Not at all. I stood looking about for a moment, hands in my pockets, at the depressing glitter and litter of Santa Monica Boulevard before it occurred to me that Phil, never having been to the O K Corral before, might have some difficulty locating the men's room, which had been placed in a spot as remote and inacessible as possible. I opened the door, with some idea of calling after him if he were still within range. He was. He was seated at the long table from which we had so recently arisen, seated in profile to me, writing something ... on sheets of crinkly paper — paper, as I saw the next moment, that had been wadded into a ball and which he had smoothed out with his hand. The unsuperstitious Phil was revising and correcting Herb Aster's account of the life of that imaginary writer whose name was loosely based on his own. And as he wrote, I heard him murmuring aloud to himself. In the hushed silence of the room, his words were like thoughts floating in the air:

"I may not cancel what has been written, but I can add a context, a qualification. I can soften what is too harsh and add little touches that will lighten and humanize. He is a writer of fantastic science stories, yes ... so I will imagine a market for such

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stories: magazines of modest circulations, paperback books, even movies and television programs. Okay. This passage is really bad — Herb, how could you? — but there's room for a sentence. If I just squeeze in this line, it will put that whole sorry business in a different light. Ah ...: good. And here I can add a qualifying negative in this sentence about his writer's block. And I think I will reinstate this relenting paragraph Herb crossed out, by writing 'stet,' the proofreader's notation for 'let it stand,' in the margin. It won't be an idyllic life, but it will be one that can be lived from day to day. Like Johnny's. Like mine. Creator Spirit, come!"

So engrossed was Phil in this task that he didn't see me. I withdrew myself and quietly closed the door.

Santa Monica Boulevard was a patchwork of darkness and glare. I stood looking about at the all-night porno movie theaters and the all-night massage parlors, the dark stores, the deserted filling station. A ghostly De Soto, pale blue or white, I couldn't decide which, moved by slowly, its three or four shadowy occupants looking me over carefully, no doubt weighing the chances of my having much money on me against the risks involved in getting it. They evidently decided against the venture, for the driver spurred the car into motion and it rattled away down the dark street. There are moments when I'm glad of my weight and size.

I stood with my toes projecting over the edge of the curb, stood balancing there, a trifle giddily, and looking down at the chewing-gum wrappers, cigarette butts, beer can pull-tabs and less identifiable refuse. I noticed that there was an incredible amount of ashes strewn in the gutter, as if from some gigantic pipe. Of course. Brush fires, I knew, were burning in the canyons to the north and east of Los Angeles, and the winds were shifting the smoke and ashes this way.

And I thought of Stanford Montagu Rhodes, the self-created man, the one-and-only, the isolate, the sole-authentic, the man who had become his own ego-ideal. He was lonely. Terribly lonely. Even lonelier than I. Well, what of it? What did it all mean, anyway? And from the gutter, by way of contrast, I looked up at the sky, saw the unattainable moon swimming in the dizzying depths, saw three or four stars ... but these last were barely visible, being unable to compete with the much lower lights about me. Up there? I thought. The Great Spirit, or some Pale-Face version of Him? The Author of all this confusion and sham? And of me, too? But who then, I asked,

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cogitating profoundly, authored *Him*? And who created that still-greater story teller? And so on, *ad infinitum*. There were vastnesses here (or emptinesses, perhaps) that one could fall into and through forever, and never find himself anywhere but where he started, here upon the gritty street.

So, "Upon the brink" ... brink? Was it "brink"? Well, say "brink":

Upon the brink
Of this wide world
I stand alone and think
Till love and fame to nothingness
do sink.

Out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed something pale or white. Something moving. I looked to the left. A car approaching. A white car, moving swiftly near the curb. I moved back a step, cautiously, watchfully. It was a white Pontiac — an ancient white Pontiac. It slid to a stop directly in front of me. A golden face leaned towards me from the driver's seat.

"Hello, Johnny. I thought I might see you again, if I came by at closing time."

Ah! I dismissed from my mind those large questions I had been asking myself. They were for the idle, the bored or the unhappy. Here was the only answer I needed. Here was the Perfectly Swell, La Belle, Fontaine.

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TWINKLE, TWINKLE MICROWAVES

When I look back over the articles I have written for this column over the last eighteen and a half years, I'm not too surprised to find an occasional one of them that has become obsolete through the advance of science.

And when that happens, I suppose I am honor-bound, sooner or later, to say so and deal with the matter once again on a newer basis.

In June of 1965, for instance, I wrote an article on pygmy stars of various kinds. I entitled it SQU-U-U-USH, and it appeared in the November 1965 issue of *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. It was later included in my essay collection *From Earth to Heaven* (Doubleday 1966).

In it, I discussed, among other things, tiny stars called "neutron stars." I said that there was speculation that one existed in the Crab Nebula, a cloud of very active gas known to be the remnants of a supernova that was seen on Earth just under a thousand years ago. X-rays were given off by the Crab Nebula, and neutron stars might be expected to give off x-rays.

If it were a neutron star, however, the x-rays would be emerging from a point source. The Moon, passing in front of the Crab Nebula would, in that case, cut off

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Science

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the x-rays all at once. I went on to say:

"On July 7, 1964, the Moon crossed the Crab Nebula and a rocket was sent up to take measurements ... Alas, the x-rays cut off gradually. The x-ray source is about a light-year across and is no neutron star ...

"... In early 1965, physicists at C.I.T. recalculated the cooling rate of a neutron star ... They decided it would ... radiate x-rays for only a matter of weeks."

The conclusion, apparently, was that it was not very likely that *any* x-ray source could be a neutron star and that these objects, even if they existed, could probably never be detected.

And yet just two years after I wrote the article (and about eight months after the essay collection was published), neutron stars were discovered after all, and quite a few of them are now known. It's only reasonable that I explain how that came about — by going back a bit.

Last month, I discussed the discovery of white dwarfs.

White dwarfs are stars that have the mass of ordinary stars, but the volume of planets. The first white dwarf to be discovered, Sirius B, has a mass equal to that of our Sun, but a diameter of only 47,000 kilometers — about that of Uranus.

How can that be?

A star like the Sun has a sufficiently intense gravitational field to pull its own matter inward with a force that will crush the atoms and reduce them to an electronic fluid within which the much tinier nuclei will move freely. Even if, under those circumstances, the Sun compressed itself to 1/26,000 its present volume and 26,000 times its present density so that it was a white dwarf the duplicate of Sirius B it would still be — from the standpoint of the atomic nuclei — mostly empty space.

Yet the Sun does not so compress itself. Why not?

There is nuclear fusion going on at the stellar core which raises the temperature there to about fifteen million degrees. The expansive effect of that temperature balances the inward pull of gravity and keeps the Sun a large ball of incandescent gas with an overall density of only 1.4 times that of water.

Eventually, however, the nuclear fusion at the center of a star will run out of fuel. This is a complicated process which we don't have to go into here, but in the end there is nothing left to supply the necessary heat at the core, the heat which keeps the star expanded. Gravitation then has its way; there is a stellar collapse, and a white dwarf is formed.

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The electronic fluid within which the nuclei of the white dwarf move can be viewed as a kind of spring that pushes back as it is compressed, and pushes back more strongly as it is compressed more tightly.

A white dwarf maintains its volume and resists further compression by the gravitational inpull through this spring action and not by the expansive effect of heat. This means that a white dwarf doesn't have to be hot. It may be hot, to be sure, because of the conversion of gravitational energy into heat in the process of collapse, but this heat can very slowly be radiated away over the eons so that the white dwarf will become, eventually, a "black dwarf," and yet will still maintain its volume — the compressed electronic fluid remaining in equilibrium with the gravitational pull forever.

Stars, however, come in different masses. The larger the mass of a star the more intense its gravitational field. When the nuclear fuel runs out and a star collapses, then the larger its mass and the more intense its gravitational field the more tightly compressed the white dwarf that results and the smaller.

Eventually, if the star is massive enough, the gravitational pull will be intense enough and the collapse energetic enough to shatter the spring of the electronic fluid, and the white dwarf will then no longer be albe to form and sustain its planetary volume.

An Indian-American astronomer, Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, considered the situation, made the necessary calculations, and, in 1931, announced that the shattering would take place if the white dwarf had a mass more than 1.4 times that of the Sun. This mass is called "Chandrasekhar's limit."

Not very many stars have masses beyond that limit; not more than 2 percent of all the stars in existence do. However, it is precisely the massive stars that run out of nuclear fuel first. The more massive a star, the more quickly it runs out of nuclear fuel and the more drastically it collapses.

Collapse must, in the 15-billion-year life span of the Universe, have taken place to a disproportionate amount among the massive stars. Of all the stars that have consumed their nuclear fuel and collapsed, at least a quarter, possibly more, have had masses greater than Chandrasekhar's limit. What happened to them?

As a star uses up its nuclear fuel, it expands, and it seems likely that only the inner regions would take part in the ultimate collapse. The outer regions would linger behind to form a "planetary nebula," one in which a bright, collapsed star was surrounded by a vast volume of gas.

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To be sure, the mass of the non-collapsed gas of a planetary nebula is not very great; so only stars slightly above the limit would lose enough mass in this way to be brought safely below the limit.

On the other hand, there are exploding stars, novas and supernovas, that, in the course of explosion lose anywhere from 10 to 90 percent of the total stellar mass. The explosion spreads dust and gas in all directions, as in the Crab Nebula, leaving only a small inner region, sometimes only a very small inner region, to undergo collapse.

One could suppose, then, that whenever the mass of a star was beyond Chandrasekhar's limit, some natural process would remove enough of the mass, to allow whatever portion collapsed to be below Chandrasekhar's limit.

But what if this were not always so? What if we could not trust the benevolence of the Universe that far, and what if sometimes a too-massive conglomeration of matter collapsed?

In 1934, the astronomers Fritz Zwicky and Walter Baade considered this possibility and decided that the collapsing star would simply crash through the electron-fluid barrier. The electrons, compressed further and further, would be squeezed into the protons of the atomic nuclei moving about in the fluid, and the combination would form neutrons. The main bulk of the star would now consist only of the neutrons present in the nucleus to begin with, plus additional neutrons formed by way of electron-proton combinations.

The collapsing star would thus become virtually nothing but neutrons, and it would continue to collapse until the neutrons were essentially in contact. It would then be a "neutron star." If the Sun collapsed into a neutron star, its diameter would be only 1/100,000 what it is now. It would be only 14 kilometers across — but it would retain all its mass.

A couple of years later, J. Robert Oppenheimer and a student of his, George M. Volkoff, worked out the theory of neutron stars in detail.

It would appear that white dwarfs were formed when relatively small stars reached their end in a reasonably quiet way. When a massive star exploded in a supernova (as only massive stars do), then the collapse is rapid enough to crash through the electron-fluid barrier. Even if enough of the star is blown away to leave the collapsing remnant below Chandrasekhar's limit, the speed of collapse may carry it through the barrier. You could therefore end up with a neutron star that was less massive than some white dwarfs.

The question is, though, whether such neutron stars really exist.

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Theories are all very nice, but unless checked by observation or experiment they remain only pleasant speculations that amuse scientists and science fiction writers. Well, you can't very well experiment with collapsing stars, and how can you observe an object only a few kilometers across that happens to be at a distance of many light-years?

If you go by light only, it would be difficult indeed, but in forming a neutron star, enough gravitational energy is converted to heat to give the freshly-formed object a surface temperature of some ten million degrees. That means it would radiate an enormous quantity of very energetic radiation — x-rays, to be exact.

That wouldn't help as far as observers on the Earth's surface were concerned since x-rays from cosmic sources would not penetrate the atmosphere. Beginning in 1962, however, rockets equipped with instruments designed to detect x-rays were sent beyond the atmosphere. Cosmic x-ray sources were discovered, and the question arose as to whether any of them might be neutron stars. By 1965, as I explained in SQU-U-U-USH, the weight of evidence seemed to imply they were not.

Meanwhile, however, astronomers were turning more and more to a study of radio-wave sources. In addition to visible light, some of the short-wave radio waves, called "microwaves," could penetrate the atmosphere; and in 1931, an American radio engineer, Karl Jansky, had detected such microwaves coming from the center of the Galaxy.

Very little interest was aroused at the time because astonomers didn't really have appropriate devices for detecting and dealing with such radiation, but during World War II, radar was developed. Radar made use of the emission, reflection and detection of microwaves, and by the end of the war astronomers had a whole spectrum of devices they could now turn to the peaceful use of surveying the heaven.

"Radio astronomy" came into being and quickly made enormous strides. In fact, astronomers learned how to use complex arrays of microwave-detecting devices ("radio telescopes") that were able to note objects at greater distances and with more sharply-defined locations than optical telescopes could.

As the technique improved, detection grew finer not only in space but in time. Not only were radio astronomers detecting point-sources, but they were getting indications that the intensity of the waves being emitted could vary with time. In the early 1960s, there was even some indication that the variation could be quite rapid, a kind of twinkle.

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The radio telescopes weren't designed to handle very rapid fluctuations in intensity because no one had really foreseen the necessity for that. Now special devices were designed that would catch microwave twinkling. In the forefront of this work was Anthony Hewish of Cambridge University Observatory. He supervised the construction of 2048 separate receiving devices spread out in an array that covered an area of 18,000 square meters (or nearly three acres).

In July 1967, the new radio telescope was set to scanning the heavens in search for examples of twinkling.

Within a month, a young graduate student, Jocelyn Bell, who was at the controls of the telescope, was receiving bursts of microwaves from a place midway between the stars Vega and Altair — very rapid bursts, too. In fact, they were so rapid as to be completely unprecedented, and Bell could not believe they came from the sky. She thought she was detecting interference with the radio telescope's workings from electrical devices in the neighborhood. As she went back to the telescope night after night, however, she found the source of the microwaves moving regularly across the sky in time with the stars. Nothing on Earth could be imitating that motion, and something in the sky had to be responsible for it. She reported the matter to Hewish.

Both zeroed in on the phenomenon, and by the end of November, they were receiving the bursts in such detail that they were able to determine that they were both rapid and regular. Each burst of radio waves lasted only one-twentieth of a second and the bursts came at intervals of 1 1/3 seconds, or about 45 times a minute.

This was not just the detection of a surprising twinkle in a radio source that had already been detected. That particular source had never been reported at all. Earlier radio telescopes were not designed to catch such very brief bursts, and would have detected only the average intensity, including the dead period between bursts. The average was only 3 percent of the maximum burst-intensity, and this went unnoticed.

The regularity of the bursts proved almost unbelievably great. They came so regularly that they could be timed to a ten-billionth of a second without finding significant variations from pulse to pulse. The period was 1.3370109 seconds.

This was extremely important. If the source were some complex agglomeration of matter, a galaxy, a star cluster, a dust cloud, then parts of it would emit microwaves in a fashion that would differ somewhat from the way other parts did it. Even if each part varied regularly, the meshing

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together would result in a rather complex resultant. For the microwave bursts detected by Bell and Hewish to be so simple and regular, a very small number of objects, perhaps even a *single* object had to be involved.

In fact, at first blush, the regularity seemed too much to expect of an inanimate object, and there was a slightly scary suspicion that it might represent an artifact after all — but not one in the neighborhood, or on Earth. Perhaps these bursts were the extra-terrestrial signals some astronomers had been trying to detect. The phenomenon was given the name "LGM" just at first ("little green men").

The LGM notion could not be long maintained, however. The bursts involved total energies perhaps ten billion times that could be produced by all Earth's sources working together so they represented an enormous investment if they were of intelligent origin. Furthermore, the bursts were so unvaryingly regular that they contained virtually no information. An advanced intelligence would have to be an advanced stupidity to spend so much energy on so little information.

Hewish could only think of the bursts as originating from some cosmic object, a star perhaps, that sent out pulses of microwaves. He therefore called the object a "pulsating star," and that was quickly shortened to "pulsar."

Hewish searched for suspicious signs of twinkles in other places in the records his instrument had been accumulating, found them, went back to check, and, in due course, was quite sure he had detected three more pulsars. On February 9, 1968, he announced the discovery to the world (and for that discovery eventually received a share of the 1974 Nobel prize for physics).

Other astronomers began to search avidly, and more pulsars were quickly discovered. Over a hundred pulsars are now known, and there may be as many as 100,000 in our Galaxy altogether. The nearest known pulsar may be as close as 300 light-years or so.

All the pulsars are characterized by extreme regularity of pulsation, but the exact period varies from pulsar to pulsar. The one with the longest period has one of 3.75491 seconds (or 16 times a minute).

The pulsar with the shortest period so far known was discovered in October 1968 by astronomers at Green Bank, West Virginia. It happens to be in the Crab Nebula, and this was the first clear link between pulsars and supernovas. The Crab Nebula pulsar has a period of only 0.033099 seconds. This is about 1813 times a minute and is about 113 times as rapid a pulsation as that of the longest-period pulsar known.

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But what could produce such rapid and such regular pulsations?

Leaving intelligence out of account, it could only be produced by the very regular movement of one, or possibly two, objects. These movements could be either: 1) the revolution of one object about another with a burst of microwaves at some one point in the revolution; 2) the rotation of a single body about its axis, with a burst at one point in the rotation; or 3) the pulsation, in and out, of a single body, with a burst at one point in the pulsation.

The revolution of one object about another could be that of a planet about its sun. This was the first fugitive thought when the suspicion existed for a while that the bursts were of intelligent origin. However, there is no reasonable way in which a planet could revolve or rotate at a rate that would account for such a rapid regularity in the absence of intelligence.

The fastest revolutions would come when the gravitational fields were most intense and, in 1968, that meant white dwarfs. Suppose you had two white dwarfs, each at the Chandrasekhar limit, revolving about each other in virtual contact. There could be no faster revolution, by 1968 thinking, and that was still not fast enough. The microwave twinkle could not be the result of revolution, therefore.

How about rotation? Suppose a white dwarf were rotating in a period of less than four seconds? No go. Even a white dwarf, despite the mighty gravitational field holding it together, would break up and tear apart, if it were rotating that fast. And that went for pulsations as well.

If the microwave twinkle were to be explained at all, what was needed was a gravitational field much more intense than those of white dwarfs, and that left astronomers only one direction in which to go.

The Austrian-born astronomer, Thomas Gold, said it first. The pulsars, he suggested, were the neutron stars that Zwicky, Baade, Oppenheimer and Volkoff had talked about a generation before. Gold pointed out that a neutron star was small enough and had a gravitational field intense enough, to be able to rotate about its axis in 4 seconds or less without tearing apart.

What's more, a neutron star should have a magnetic field as any ordinary star might have, but the magnetic field of a neutron star would be as compressed and concentrated as its matter was. For that reason, a neutron star's magnetic field would be enormously more intense than the fields about ordinary stars.

The neutron star, as it whirled on its axis, would give off electrons

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from its outermost layers (in which protons and electrons would still be existing) thanks to its enormous surface temperature. Those electrons would be trapped by the magnetic field and would be able to escape only at the magnetic poles at opposite sides of the neutron stars.

The magnetic poles need not be at the actual rotational poles (they aren't in the case of the Earth, for instance). Each magnetic pole would sweep around the rotational pole in seconds or in fractions of a second and would spray out electrons as it does so (just as a rotating water sprinkler jets out water). As the electrons are thrown off, they curve in response to the neutron star's magnetic field and lose energy in the process. That energy emerges in the form of microwaves, which are not affected by magnetic fields, and which go streaking off into space.

Every neutron star thus ends by shooting out two jets of radio waves from opposite sides of its tiny globe. If a neutron star happens to move one of those jets across our line of sight as it rotates, Earth would get a very brief pulse of microwaves at each rotation. Some astronomers estimate that only one neutron star out of a hundred would just happen to send microwaves in our direction; so that of the possibly 100,000 in our Galaxy, we might never be able to detect more than a thousand.

Gold went on to point out that, if his theory were correct, the neutron star would be leaking energy at the magnetic poles, and its rate of rotation would have to be slowing down. This meant that the faster the period of a pulsar, the younger it was likely to be and the more rapidly it might be losing energy and slowing down.

That fits the fact that the Crab Nebula neutron star is the shortest-period one that is known, since it is not quite a thousand years old and may easily be the youngest we can observe. At the moment of its formation, it might have been rotating a thousand times a second. The rotation would have slowed rapidly down to a mere thirty times a second now.

The Crab Nebula neutron star was studied carefully, and it was indeed found to be lengthening its period. The period is increasing by 36.48 billionths of a second each day and, at that rate, its period of rotation will double in length in 1200 years. The same phenomenon has been discovered in the other neutron stars whose periods are slower than that of the Crab Nebula and whose rate of rotational slowing is also slower. The first neutron star discovered by Bell, now called CP1919, is slowing its rotation at a rate that will double its period only after 16 million years.

As a pulsar slows its rotation, its bursts of microwaves become less

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energetic. By the time the period has passed four seconds in length, the neutron star would no longer be detectable. Neutron stars probably endure as detectable objects for tens of millions of years, however.

As a result of the studies of the slowing of the microwave bursts, astronomers are now pretty well satisfied that the pulsars are neutron stars, and my old essay SQU-U-U-USH stands corrected.

Sometimes, by the way, a neutron star will suddenly speed its period very slightly, then resume the slowing trend. This was first detected in February 1969 when the period of the neutron star, Vela X-1, was found to alter suddenly. The sudden shift was called, slangily, a "glitch," from a Yiddish word meaning "to slip," and that word is now part of the scientific vocabulary.

Some astronomers suspect glitches may be the result of a "starquake," a shifting of mass distribution within the neutron star that will result in its shrinking in diameter by a centimeter or less. Or perhaps it might be the result of the plunging of a sizable meteor into the neutron star so that the momentum of the meteor is added to that of the star.

There is, of course, no reason why the electrons emerging from a neutron star should lose energy only as microwaves. They should produce waves all along the spectrum. They should, for instance, emit x-rays, too, and the Crab Nebula neutron star does indeed emit them. About 10 to 15 percent of all the x-rays the Crab Nebula produces is from its neutron star. The other 85 percent or more, that came from the turbulent gases

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surrounding the neutron star, obscured this fact and disheartened those astronomers who hunted for a neutron star there in 1964.

A neutron star should produce flashes of visible light, too.

In January 1969, it was noted that the light of a dim sixteenth-magnitude star within the Crab Nebula *did* flash on and off in precise time with the radio pulses. The flashes were so short and the period between them was so brief that special equipment was required to catch those flashes. Under ordinary observation, the star seemed to have a steady light.

The Crab Nebula neutron star was the first "optical pulsar" discovered, the first *visible* neutron star and until now, still the only one.

This doesn't end the story, for my essay SQU-U-U-USH was wrong in another, and still more spectacular respect, than in the case of neutron stars.

Correcting that will enable me to take one more step. Last month we talked about the discovery of that small, dense, stellar monster, the white dwarf.

This month we talked about the discovery of that smaller, denser, stellar super-monster, the neutron star.

Well, next month, it will be time to describe the discovery of that smallest, densest, stellar superest-monster, the black hole.

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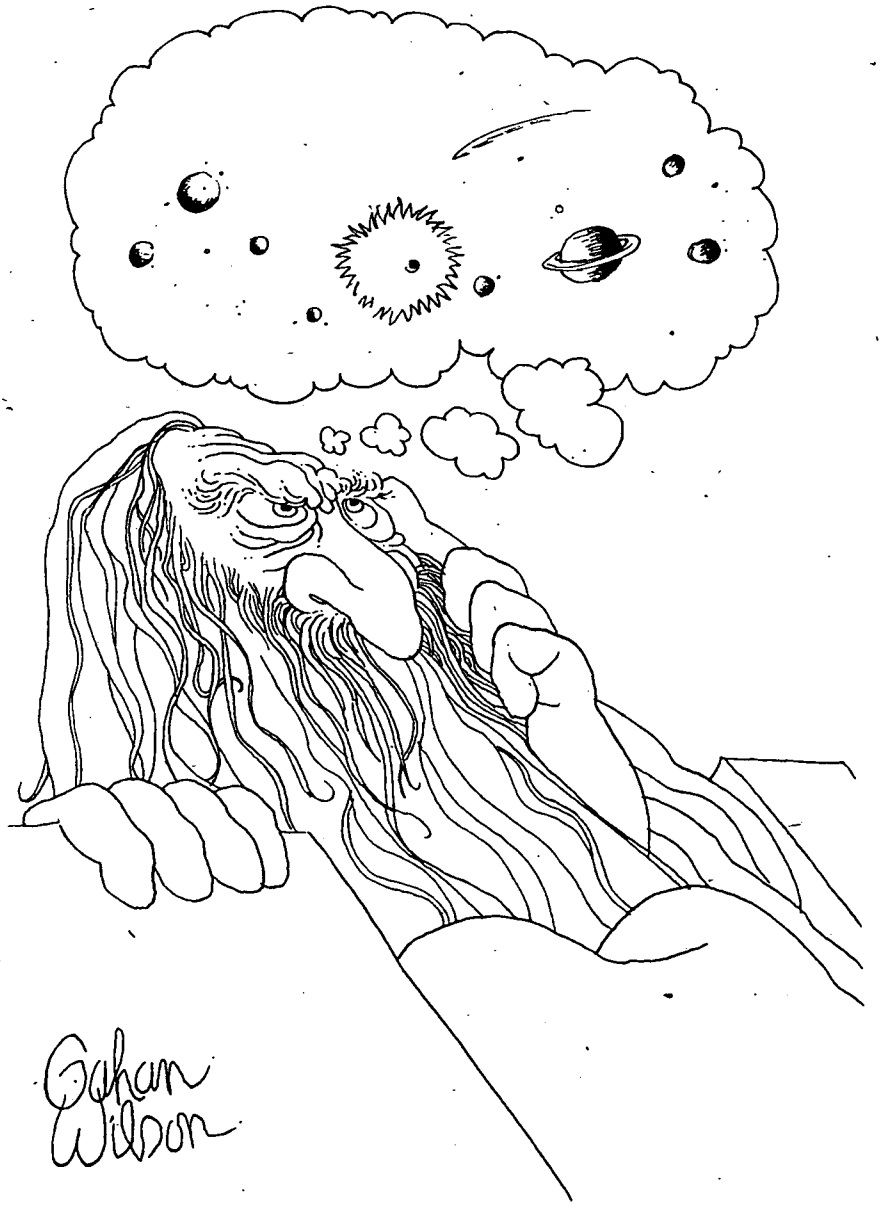

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Richard Frede wrote "Theory and Practice of Economic Development: The Metallurgist and His Wife," (August 1976). His new story is about an architect who inherits four million dollars and begins a search for the most comfortable house in the world.

Mr. Murdoch's Ghost

by RICHARD FREDE

At the age of thirty-eight Mr. Murdoch inherited, after taxes, nearly four million dollars. He had not planned on the inheritance — it came to him from a relative he had neither seen nor thought about since childhood.

Mr. Murdoch was unmarried and did not intend ever to marry. This was not a sexual disinclination — he always had a woman friend somewhere in his life. It was merely that he disliked encumbrances.

He was, at the time of his inheritance, working in an architect's office in Manhattan. He himself was an architect, but his workday was more that of a draftsman than that of a designer. Like his professional training, his background had prepared him for a better sort of life, but such were his abilities and luck that, until the inheritance, the better sort of life had eluded him.

Though he had made no formal plans for wealth, Mr. Murdoch had, since his eleventh year, entertained a fantasy which served him every bit as well as logical preparation. The fantasy had become, over the years, quite detailed. As detailed as a bookkeeper's books or, say, a draftsman's drawings.

When Mr. Murdoch was just between childhood and adolescence, he had once spent a night in what he came to think of as the most comfortable house he had ever been in. A classmate, not a real friend, had impulsively invited him home from their boarding school one cold Saturday afternoon when Murdoch had kicked the winning goal just before time was called in a soccer game against their school's traditional rival. Young Murdoch, whose first year this was in boarding school, had been unsuccessful at making friends, and he accepted the invitation happily.

The classmate's parents had driven them, in a paneled station

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wagon, to a country home about an hour away from the school. A jovial pair, the parents laughed and joked all the way home, but soon thereafter went out for the evening and slept late the next day. Young Murdoch hardly saw them at all until it was time for the father to drive the boys back to their school late the next afternoon.

A live-in cook-and-maid gave the boys a good dinner, and then they listened to radio in a book-lined den which had a real fireplace with a real fire going in it. Bread was being baked in the kitchen. But it was the house — the totality of it — which young Murdoch loved. A white wooden house in black winter woods when they had come upon it in the station wagon, he learned that it predated the Revolution. There was a working fireplace in almost every room. Above him were the warm dark lines of exposed beams. There were the smells of burning wood and of baking bread. The old chairs and couches suggested rich conversation, good friendship, and the safety of times which have already passed.

But it was not these circumstances alone which finally determined Mr. Murdoch's lifelong fantasy. It was a threat. The threat came from young Murdoch's classmate, who, apparently grown bored with and perhaps a little antagonistic toward his afternoon's hero, instructed young Murdoch upon the dangers of the house. This was just before bedtime. They were standing in the spare room which young Murdoch was to occupy.

The classmate said, "You know, Murdoch, this house has a ghost and you had better understand that it is a real ghost. It hasn't struck often, but three people have died in this house in the last hundred years, two of them in this room, and there has never been any explanation. Save for laughter some people claim to have heard about the times of death. There was a man who lived here. He was wealthy, I guess. Then he lost everything. And the sheriff, I guess, came and told him he had to get out of this house. The man brooded, they say, and just before he had to get out of the house, he committed suicide. He left a note saying that no one would ever occupy this house or sleep in it without his approval. He said he was going to come back as a ghost and kill anyone he didn't like who slept here. As I say, it hasn't happened often, but it has happened three times since the man committed suicide. The ghost is like a snake, a viper really, who lives somewhere in the walls and strikes when he fancies. Well, Murdoch, good night. And sleep well."

Murdoch did not sleep at all. At least not until first light. But it was the most comfortable night of his

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life. Settling under the covers, the lights out, warm in the great, soft bed with the cold winter night about him, young Murdoch realized, after a few minutes, that he wasn't afraid of the ghost at all. In fact, the presence of the ghost, which he discovered he truly believed in, comforted him. He felt some liaison with the ghost and concluded that it was because both of them were friendless and lonely. He was sure the ghost understood him and liked him. Beyond that, he had the wonderfully comfortable and comforting feeling that the ghost, far from endangering him, was looking after him. It was the best feeling he had ever had.

Young Murdoch was never invited back to that most comfortable of houses, though he tried often enough, in both fervor and embarrassment, to persuade his classmate to do so.

Young Murdoch had spent most of his life in the city, and though he knew little enough about the country that first year in boarding school, he realized that he detested the city. Not only the city in general, but the small apartment with his quarreling parents in particular. He had decided then, though he didn't realize it at the time, that as soon as he was able, when he was grown up and through with college, he would never again live with another person. And, if he were able, he would live in the country. In a white wooden house with exposed beams. There would be old furniture and a working fireplace in every room. One of the rooms would be a book-lined den. Another of the rooms would be a kitchen which could provide whatever food he desired. The kitchen would be attended by a woman who baked bread regularly. The house itself would be attended by a ghost.

As he grew older and had more experiences and knowledge of the world, the dream, the desire, the fantasy became exquisitely detailed. Plaid blankets for the beds. Slippery, silver-silked comforters. His own bed would be canopied. In the den, which he had come to think of as the library, some old books of the period of the house. On the walls, antique prints and engravings dealing with themes martial, naval, equestrian, and sporting. He would have a good wine cellar. In the dining room there would be a crystal chandelier overhanging a polished and shining, dark wood table. When he entertained there would be gleaming silver next to bright white linen. He would entertain carefully and well, never more than six at table. Sometimes he would prepare the meal himself, sometimes his cook would. In any circumstances, she would not live in. He would ride, but he would not keep a horse, at least not keep a

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horse he had to attend to himself. He would indulge in a modicum of blood sport. Shoot bird, but not deer. He would live where there was skiing nearby, and his friends would visit him in the snowtime. There would be fires in the fireplaces, and his friends would see him standing before the fireplace in the living room, smiling, beckoning them to enjoy his beneficence. A gracious lady would take his arm as they all went in to diner. He would give them a good bottle of wine and food worthy of comment. They would go back to the city reporting their amazing host and his house. At night, when he was there by himself, he would go to bed with feelings of sureness and safety, for the ghost would be overseeing his principality and giving him protection.

Mr. Murdoch had hoped it would happen but never really expected that it would.

The first thing Mr. Murdoch did after coming into the inheritance and quitting his job was to go looking for a paneled station wagon. He finally settled on a green one. The brown paneling was actually plastic, but it was the best he could do. He bought a new wardrobe in the best stores and handsome luggage in which to carry it, and he departed Manhattan in the station wagon and drove north to New England in search of his house. It was a fine, golden summer, and Mr. Murdoch enjoyed the driving, but a search through Connecticut and then Western Massachusetts and then the length of Vermont failed to discover a single house suitable to the details of Mr. Murdoch's fantasy. He became disheartened. Then he became anxious, quite as if his life depended upon finding that special vehicle for turning his fantasy into reality. He lay awake at night in country inns and he was not comfortable at all.

One chilly, wet day, when the wind blew the rain in sheets across the road in front of him, Mr. Murdoch crossed over into southern New Hampshire intending to drive to Boston for some refreshment. He had, he had decided, been working much too hard. Using a map, he attempted a series of shortcuts on minor roads and got lost. This brought him to the village of Glenhaven, a gem of a village, Mr. Murdoch immediately appreciated. A few white houses, a white church, a white general store, and hills and meadows all about. In the store he inquired of a real-estate agent, and an hour later a Mr. Franklin came over from a nearby town. Franklin affected a country style but was as rich as anybody about and just as knowledgeable. He listened to Mr. Murdoch and then said, "Haven't got anythin' that's pre-Revolution-

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ary, but I got one that's pretty close."

In Mr. Franklin's car they took a road about a mile into the woods. Abruptly they came out into a small meadow. Up against the woods was a white wooden house. It was somewhat similar to the one which Mr. Murdoch had experienced in his youth, and after the disappointments of his search so far, he was willing to ignore, temporarily, the obvious dissimilarities.

Mr. Franklin said, "This house was built in 1797."

Mr. Murdoch said, "Colonial?"

Mr. Franklin said, "Not Colonial. Federal. On the other hand, nobody knows what Federal is."

Mr. Franklin started to get out of the car. "If you don't mind," Mr. Murdoch said, "I'd rather go in alone. I'd like to see what it feels like by myself."

"I quite understand," Mr. Franklin said, though Mr. Murdoch doubted that he did. Mr. Franklin handed Mr. Murdoch a key.

Mr. Murdoch went to the door of the house. The door would require a brass knocker. The house would need to be repainted, not because it was peeling, but because it could be still whiter. Mr. Murdoch went in.

He went about from room to room. What first concerned him was that the rooms seemed to be rather too quiet for even an unoccupied house — there was no other presence. But there was a living room with a huge fireplace and a sitting room with a smaller one. The fireplace in the smaller room had been covered over, but the mantel was still there. It was a room which might serve a gentleman for his library. The kitchen was a large shedlike attachment to the house itself. A perfectly proportioned dining room for a table of six also seemed to have a fireplace hiding in one of its walls. Steep narrow stairs took him to the second story. A master bedroom with yet another closed-over fireplace. A private bath to the master bedroom. There were three other smaller bedrooms and another bath. There was evidence of still another closed-over fireplace in one of the lesser bedrooms. Nowhere did Mr. Murdoch find any signs of insect or rodent damage, and the roof and walls, he noted, had kept the weather out nicely. He went down to the basement. The cellar floor was dirt and it was dry. A huge chimney arch rose from the middle of the floor into the center of the upstairs, suggesting several fireplaces above it. Mr. Murdoch went back to the first floor. The boards there were narrow and thus disappointing to him. The beams were hidden by plaster ceilings. All in all, Mr. Murdoch decided he didn't mind that. It

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seemed more elegant to him.

But there were two basic problems to the house, one soluble and the other — if indeed it existed — not so. One of the problems was that the house had been subject to "updatings" by its various tenants. Each generation of occupants had done things to the house to make it look more in style with whatever architectural vogue had currently been fancied. Outcroppings, like architectural weeds, sprang at Mr. Murdoch's offended eye everywhere, both inside and out. There were touches of neo-Roman and of neo-Greek. *Art nouveau* contested for attention with Gothic Revival. A misguided intrusion of Third Empire France was surrounded by Bauhaus innuendo. All that could be seen to.

The other problem could not be seen to. There was the unbecoming silence, the *absence,* Mr. Murdoch thought. There was no ghost. He was sure of it.

A knocking on the front door and Mr. Murdoch opened it. Mr. Franklin said, "Been through it?"

"Yes."

"Then you've seen that it's fit, Mr. Murdoch. A man could move himself and his family in here tonight, if he got the water turned on and the electricity goin'. Old as it is, this house is fit."

"Does it have a ghost?" Mr. Murdoch asked.

"Definitely not," said Mr. Franklin, but then, noting a reaction in Mr. Murdoch which was, perhaps, a signal of dissatisfaction, he said, "Leastways not that I ever hear tell of. But, then, I don't hear tell of everythin'. And it *is* an old house."

"How much are you asking?"

"Twenty-two," said Mr. Franklin.

"Eighteen," said Mr. Murdoch.

"Well, I could go twenty-one five," said Mr. Franklin. "If you're prepared to conclude the transaction this week."

"I am," said Mr. Murdoch. "Eighteen five."

"There's a stable you haven't seen," said Mr. Franklin. "It'd make a nifty carpentry shop."

"Eighteen five."

"Then there's a brook where I've taken trout myself."

"But no ghost," said Mr. Murdoch. "Eighteen five."

"There's an apple orchard comes with it over to the next —"

"But no ghost," said Mr. Murdoch. "Eighteen five."

"This house is fit. It don't need no fixin'."

"It doesn't have a ghost," said Mr. Murdoch. "Twenty thousand. That is my top offer. If it is inadequate, there is no need for further discussion."

During the next few days the title was searched, payment was

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made, and papers were passed. The house became the property of Mr. Murdoch.

Mr. Murdoch then returned to New York City and disposed of the physical accumulations of his former life while at the same time acquiring yet other goods which befitted his concept of what his new life would be. He bought a fine shotgun. He had two tweed suits and three tweed jackets made. He bought a pair of skis for normal conditions and another pair for icy conditions and then, because he happened to see it, cross-country ski equipment. In the same store he came upon snowshoes and bought two pairs — one pair for a guest. He bought perfumes for the guest bath — a grace note which had impressed him in yet another house he had enjoyed. He bought delicacies for his larder and wines for his cellar and batteries of utensils for his kitchen. He determined the sort of china and silver which would be appropriate to his new home, for — when he was not shopping and buying and shipping to the new home — he was in a library studying the details of domestic architecture and furnishings in the Federal period. He ordered copies of the pertinent books to take back with him for his own library, and when they proved to be unavailable, he had his bookstore advertise for them.

On his way back to Glenhaven, the station wagon bearing a share of his new acquisitions (including a copy of *The Federalist Papers*), Mr. Murdoch drove into a new season. Exposed to bright colors and chill air, Mr. Murdoch found his senses newly awakened, not having known that they were asleep or dozing. The smell of woodsmoke itself was new and welcome and invigorating. Mr. Murdoch began his new life by returning his old house to its past.

He took up temporary residence in a motel several miles away and went about interviewing contractors, carpenters, particular craftsmen, and others. He had much of the wiring and plumbing in the house replaced and amplified to his specifications. The kitchen was modernized — Mr. Murdoch's major concession to the present. He had a search begun for a copper tub for his personal bath. The pine-board floors throughout the house had been painted. So he had them stripped and stained dark. He had the wainscoting stripped. He had the ceilings replastered. He had the outside of the house given a new coat of white paint so that it glistened in the sun during the day and seemed to illuminate its own exterior at night. Where color was used in the interior, the colors were first justified by the books. Pine shelves were secured from other old houses and built into the sitting

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room to make it his library. He had the fireplaces uncovered and the chimneys and flues opened and swept. He ordered cords of wood. He found dealers who had plundered houses similar to his own, and he acquired from them old square bricks for a hearth and old small bricks to repair the fireplaces. He had the fanlight over the door reconstructed. He found the small windowpanes — the nuisance panes — required and had them put back all through the house. He searched out proper wooden shingles and had the slate ones on the roof replaced. Someone had begun (irresponsibly, to Mr. Murdoch's mind) to convert the stable into a carpentry shop. Mr. Murdoch had the offending adaptations ripped out and the stable restored to its original purpose. He purchased a canopied bed and some brass-appointed campaign chests, and in the midst of winter, the rougher and dirtier work of the refurbishment completed, he moved in. The house smelt of paint. At a greenhouse some two hours' drive away, he was able to purchase traditional herbs and other growing things to make the air in his house smell worthily. At night there was a fire in the fireplace in his bedroom as he read before sleeping. He awoke to the fire's embers in the morning. The master bedroom, including a copper tub, was in spanking order. He found and retained a Mrs. Trowbridge, who then came in to clean and to cook. She baked bread and rolls three times a week.

By catalogue, correspondence, and agent, Mr. Murdoch scoured the auction houses, galleries, and antique stores of London for the sort of table or place setting he had decided upon. In this fashion he acquired, from a London auction and for $8000, a crystal chandelier for over the dining room table — though he did not yet have a dining room table. A man had to be brought up from New York to sort the pieces and then assemble and hang the chandelier. It took him several days. Mr. Murdoch himself spent several days a month in Boston and New York nosing out the needs of his house. Galleries and auctioneers began inviting him to private previews. Sometimes his fancy enlarged upon itself as when, in Boston, while looking for maritime prints of the Federal period, he came upon an oil portrait of a gentleman of that time and decided that suitably venerable oils which were to his liking might also abide upon the walls of his house.

Secretly, Mr. Murdoch hung a picture of young Murdoch in a closet in his bedroom. Young, friendless, yearning Murdoch of the preparatory school days. When Mr. Murdoch opened the closet, he saw young Murdoch's unhappiness, and

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he felt compassion for the boy and pride in the man he had become and the man's accomplishment — this house.

At night he prayed for sounds. But there were none, save those which were so mundane that reason could account for them.

By spring, the house — very nearly bare that first winter save for the canopied bed, the campaign chests, the copper tub, and the crystal chandelier — began to fill out with the details of which Mr. Murdoch had put it in want. Crystal goblets and a dining table arrived from London. Silver was found in Boston and brought home in the plastic-paneled station wagon. A set of six prints depicting the various dress uniforms of officers in Napoleon's armies was found in New York. Two chairs of the period for the library were found in Boston as well as a stuffed couch which, though not of the period, Mr. Murdoch had caused to be covered in material appropriate to the period.

Also in the spring Mr. Murdoch acquired two fine horses. He named them After Midnight and Post Noon and rode each only at its own time of day. He hired a high-school student to tend the stable and groom the horses. He discovered that the apple orchard on his property had gone very nearly to ruin. He spent several thousand dollars having it revived and brought to health. In the fall he could always send baskets of apples to friends. He liked the idea very much.

He began to entertain. Local nobility — of which there was a surprising plenty in the nearby woods. A present congressman. A former governor. A movie actress and her baseball-player husband. Some writers and artists. Local professionals. Some well-known Harvard professors who were retired or who came over from Cambridge for weekends and summers. A famous pianist. A respected physicist. A man who owned one of the biggest private companies in the country. A man who was chief pilot of an airline. A woman who owned an advertising agency. A countess. Others. Mr. Murdoch enjoyed entertaining them and showing them about his house. As the years went by and the furnishings became more complete, the tours took longer, protracted by the anecdotal biography attending each of Mr. Murdoch's many acquisitions.

In the spring and summer and fall, Mr. Murdoch, who took good care of himself, played golf and tennis. He tried to do these things as a gentleman — that is, with no thought of winning. But winning was always on his mind. In the summer he kept a boat on a nearby lake and sailed. Also, in the summer, he fished trout from the brook

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behind his house. These he served cooked in butter or cooked in wine, sometimes with almonds. A light white wine, well-chilled, always accompanied the trout. Usually, cold asparagus with his own mayonnaise or vinaigrette. For dessert, fresh strawberries and cream, sometimes preceded by cheese. Dinner was never served until after dark, thus occasioning candles. Mrs. Trowbridge waited table. In the fall Mr. Murdoch shot birds at a private club, had Mrs. Trowbridge pluck, blood, eviscerate, and clean them; and then he himself prepared them for his table. His guests were invariably complimentary to his skill in the kitchen and impressed by the manner in which he had provided the birds.

But always at night Mr. Murdoch lay awake and listened for sounds, for sounds of something present. But what he heard was absence and he was not at all comfortable.

The second winter he bought a basset hound to lie at his feet in front of the fire. The second spring he began a most ambitious rock garden. The third summer he found a barn full of wide pine boards such as must have originally floored his house. He purchased the barn for its boards and moved to the motel for a few weeks while the old narrow-board floors were torn out of his house and the wide boards put in. The house was repainted yearly, and Mr. Murdoch never ceased in carefully and deliberately acquiring and installing the real details of what had been a fantasy.

A visitor from New York asked Mrs. Trowbridge, "What will Mr. Murdoch do with himself when he finishes it."

Mrs. Trowbridge, who was astute, replied simply, "He will never finish with it. It's his life."

And so he did not finish it for some years. But, so scrupulous had Mr. Murdoch been, after ten years there was nothing else to be done or even to be redone. Mr. Murdoch looked outside. But the rock garden needed nothing more than tending. The apple orchard flourished. There was nothing left to be landscaped, and what was landscaped was cared for by a gardener. Mr. Murdoch inspected the rooms of his house over and over and found nothing but perfection. To modify or add to what he had done would be like purposely tarnishing the brass at his door or the silver at his table. He would not do it.

There was, of course, no ghost. And so, thought Mr. Murdoch, after all, after *all,* he did not have perfection. Though there was no way in which he could improve upon what he already had.

He had always enjoyed cooking, and so he sought to relieve his sense of failure, bleak and irrevocable

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failure, by creating perfection in his kitchen where he had been unable to do so in his house. Days were spent on the details of a meal, a part of a meal. Days were spent traveling to get even a single bottle of wine which Mr. Murdoch thought the meal demanded. He shopped in the ethnic neighborhoods of several different cities to find what he required, sometimes flying from one city to another to get individual items for the same dinner. Still rarer items were sought out through catalogues and in international telephone conversations and were then shipped to him from all over the world.

One winter's weekend, just before Christmas, it happened that Mr. Murdoch was visited by two couples from New York of whom he was most particularly fond. It was in their esteem especially that he enjoyed a reflection on himself. The two couples had suggested that they bring along a mystery guest — about whom Mr. Murdoch was told only that she was a young woman whose name he would know. He agreed to the additional guest. If his friends thought so well of her, he wanted strongly that she think well of him.

The dinner Mr. Murdoch chose to do for them all took six weeks to prepare. Two weeks of reading and studying, two weeks of traveling and searching to find some of the ingredients, and finally, two weeks of work in the kitchen. He constructed the menu so that everything could be prepared ahead of time and, indeed, had to be prepared ahead of time in order that peaks of flavor and maturity be reached and could, then, at a suitable hour, be heated by Mrs. Trowbridge. Mr. Murdoch's intention was to ski all day with his friends and then come home and be his own guest. A bit of sherry while he bathed in the copper tub and got the chill out and relaxed. Good conversation while his friends had their martinis and whiskeys and he had a second sherry and then his remarkable dinner together with an extraordinary wine, which, unfortunately, no one there other than himself would be knowledgeable enough to fully appreciate.

That is more or less how the evening progressed, from fireplace in the living room to fireplace and candlelight in the dining room. The unknown guest was attractive and pleasant and no older than twenty-five. She had written (to Mr. Murdoch's mind) a rather nasty little novel, which, nonetheless, had had both critical and financial success and was to be made into a movie. Her novel was set in the Federal period. No one in the period had had her admiration, and Mr. Murdoch had wondered why she'd been intent on writing of that time. How-

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ever, to Mr. Murdoch's pleasure, she took pleasure in Mr. Murdoch's house. She was the first person to come to his house who readily understood what he had created, or re-created. She recognized the nuances. She understood the careful compromises with the present. Mr. Murdoch was delighted with her.

Mr. Murdoch decided that he and his guests would take brandy and liqueur in the library. Its size and seating arrangements were more intimate than those of the living room, and its mannerly fire was, just then, its only illumination. Mr. Murdoch decided not to change the situation.

When his guests — a lawyer and his wife, a doctor and his wife, and the novelist — were seated and served and Mr. Murdoch returned with a liqueur for himself, he found that they were talking about ghosts, about haunted houses. "You see," said the lawyer, "I was talking about visiting a house when I was a child and an incident which happened there which I just can't explain. Unless I admitted to ghosts, which I don't."

"When we were on our honeymoon," the doctor's wife said and then told a rather lewd, but chilling story of something that had happened to them one night they had spent in a castle.

The doctor said, "I wouldn't want my patients to know this, but there is no doubt in my mind that something supernatural happened to us that night."

"Did you ever notice," said the novelist, "that people who have had weird experiences, sometimes even *horrible* experiences with ghosts, or whatever you want to call the phenomena — have you ever noticed how people have an affection, a positive *affection,* for the places where they had the experiences? They may not be fond of the experience itself, but they're fond of the place where they had the experience, and they talk about it whenever anyone will listen. Sometimes they're even fond of the experience." She then told the story of having been raped one night, while still an adolescent virgin, in her own bed, in the present century, by a man whom she later, accidentally and in a book, discovered to be General Alexander Farnsworth, a Federalist in time, if not in persuasion. She'd woken in the morning bleeding. "It turned out," she said, "that General Farnsworth had spent his latter years in that same house where I grew up. If you've read my book, you know he was a very bitter man there toward the end. May I have a bit more brandy?"

When Mr. Murdoch came back with her brandy, he heard her voice before he entered the library. He paused outside the doorway and

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out of sight and heard her saying to the others: "Yes, he's done a super job, an *immaculate* job, but that's just it, it's immaculate, there's just no sense of the past here. Not in the sense of what *occupies* the house. Do you notice there's a silence here sometimes as if *nothing* is here?"

The rest of the evening was spent, in Mr. Murdoch's silence, listening to his guests describe, at first tentatively and later enthusiastically, the strange and wonderful places where they had been haunted, where there was a ghost, where they had been, however briefly, terrified by *a presence.*

That was the phrase the novelist used. "There was a *presence.*"

In the presence of such fervent commemorations of other houses, Mr. Murdoch felt his own house, and himself with it, become as nothing. He felt that his old friends were being wantonly and flagrantly and deliberately rude to him. In particular he despised the novelist. Pleading fatigue, he went to his room. The eighteenth-century equestrian engravings which faced him there from over the mantel in his bedroom were, to his eye, pieces of paper, and paper only now. The house itself might have been part of a Long Island development. He lay awake, most uncomfortable, lonely and friendless, and winter all about. There was no secret sound to comfort him, no *presence.*

In the morning he sent word by Mrs. Trowbridge that he was ill and would rather not see anyone, not even to say good-by. His guests left immediately after being served brunch.

Christmas week came, and though he had been invited to a number of parties, Mr. Murdoch kept to himself. No matter what time of day or night, he felt chilly. He checked the thermostat for both setting and reading. It always assured him that he should be feeling warm and comfortable. He listened to the heat in the ducts and spouting from the registers, but felt none of it. Fires in all the fireplaces had no effect upon him. He thought, "I am a man of substance, a substantial man with a substantial house, why should I be this way?"

New Year's Day was but forty-eight hours away, and Mr. Murdoch told himself sternly, "I cannot go through another week this way, much less an entire year."

On the eve of New Year's Eve, as he lay awake, chilly and lonely and friendless, listening for sounds, waiting for that feeling of presence he had known briefly as a boy, he came suddenly and joyfully to a conclusion, a solution, almost as if that long-ago ghost had come to him for an instant to instruct him. Mr. Murdoch decided to commit suicide and take up ghostly residence in his own house. Nothing

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could be more logical or esthetically pleasing than that he himself be the culmination and completion of his dream, his work of art, the perfect house presided over and protected by a ghost. He felt flushed with warmth.

Mr. Murdoch hugged himself. He would have his house and he would have his ghost and he would have himself. "World without end," Mr. Murdoch thought joyfully. He spent the remainder of the night — long hours which passed as so many quick minutes — determining the details of maintaining his residence in the future and deciding upon what he came to think of as "the engine" of his demise. Leave-taking of his body had to be brief and as painless as possible, and the means by which it was accomplished had to be immediately available. He thought of the fine shotgun. But that would be messy, and he did not want to do anything which would physically blemish his house, even its cellar. And were he to commit suicide *outside* the house, he wasn't sure but that he might have to haunt the place of death. So the fine shotgun, suitable as it appeared to be, was not suitable at all. An overdose of something, while physically clean, might be painful, or it might not work. Carbon monoxide poisoning from his faithful old station wagon would be painless, but that would require death in the garage, a separate building, and Mr. Murdoch had no intention of haunting a garage... except that....

At eight thirty the following morning he was at his lawyer's, and such was Mr. Murdoch's custom with the man that he was able to claim all of the man's time in spite of other appointments. By noon a trust had been drawn up which guaranteed and funded, in the event of Mr. Murdoch's death, the preservation of the house and its effects in their present condition. Certain people — rather a long list of them — would have guest privileges which they might exercise one night a year. Mr. Murdoch particularly looked forward to a visit by the young novelist. He could see her going back to New York amazed at the presence she had felt, talking about and perhaps even writing about the Murdoch house and the Murdoch ghost. Mrs. Trowbridge, or a trust-appointed successor, would tend the house daily. Mr. Murdoch left Mrs. Trowbridge five thousand dollars, but otherwise everything else went into the trust once it was converted to cash. By one o'clock the trustees had been chosen and had accepted their office. Mr. Murdoch drove over to a builders' supply store in a nearby town and purchased a great length of two-inch hose. He was back in Glenhaven at four o'clock. The

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trust had been typed up and the appropriate signatures were put to it. On his way home Mr. Murdoch stopped for the few odd gallons of gasoline needed to top off the station wagon's tank. Back in his garage Mr. Murdoch bound one end of the hose tightly about the exhaust pipe of the station wagon. He introduced the other end of the hose into the library through a window. He taped heavy cardboard inside and outside the window to close off the open area not occupied by the hose. He wrote a note and placed it in an envelope and placed the envelope on the table beside the chair he had chosen to sit in. The note set forth his intention and his motivations. He cautioned such friends and acquaintances as might be inclined to do so not to grieve for him, for, as he wrote, *I die a happy man.* Mr. Murdoch went to his wine cellar and brought up the very best bottle he had. He wondered whether carbon monoxide would affect its taste or bouquet. Nonsense, he thought, carbon monoxide is odorless. Then — Even so, he thought — but dismissed the detail as insignificant. He placed the open bottle and a glass on the table beside the chair in the library. He closed the fireplace flue and closed both doors to the library. He went out to the station wagon and started the engine. He went back to the library, closing the door behind him, and sat in the chosen chair and prepared to enjoy his bottle of wine, or part of it, as he looked at the open mouth of the hose and heard the distant engine. Carbon monoxide may be odorless, Mr. Murdoch thought, but really, the other exhaust fumes are a nuisance.

Mrs. Trowbridge found him. She was most upset and had to be given a sedative. A relative of his, of whom Mr. Murdoch had been unaware, contested the will and broke the trust and acquired Mr. Murdoch's worldly goods. The relative put the house on the market and hired a representative who advertised the furnishings.

One spring day, just before the active house-buying season usually began, Mr. Franklin, with whom it was listed, stopped in at Mr. Murdoch's house and found Mrs. Trowbridge there.

Mr. Franklin said, "It sure is a corker of a house now. But I'm going to have a hard time selling it. Maybe more trouble than any house I got. Could take years. People just don't want a house where there was a suicide. They won't admit it, but most people believe in ghosts and they're scared silly of them."

"There isn't one," Mrs. Trowbridge said. "There's no ghost here."

"Well, now, *I'm* not real serious personally," said Mr. Franklin. "*I*

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don't believe in ghosts."

"I do," said Mrs. Trowbridge. "I can say flatly there is no ghost in this house. Furthermore, I can prove it."

"You can?" said Mr. Franklin. "That would be interesting. I mean, Mrs. Trowbridge, how do you prove the nonexistence of something which is nonexistent?"

"Well, I don't know about all that philosophical stuff, Mr. Franklin. But I do know this. Ghosts are the spirits of people who died real unhappy. Now Mr. Murdoch, he died happy. His note says so. 'I die a happy man.' He was completing his life and his house and providing his house with a ghost. But a man who dies happy can't become a ghost. No ghost of Mr. Murdoch."

Dealers came from Boston, New York, and even London, and soon the house was bare again, with no sign of Mr. Murdoch, save its architectural restoration, which, anyway, was not attributed to him but to local contractors, carpenters, and other craftsmen.

Mr. Franklin sold the house sooner that he had expected. The new occupants reported nothing untoward.

Even so, Mrs. Trowbridge had been wrong, and the house was indeed haunted, though not by Mr. Murdoch. The house was haunted — inescapably so — by the lost and voiceless boy, young Murdoch, who had disappeared those many years before and who could effect nothing, and so was never seen nor heard nor felt in the house, just as had been his lot in life, save for one long-ago and now-forgotten soccer goal on a winter weekend's afternoon.

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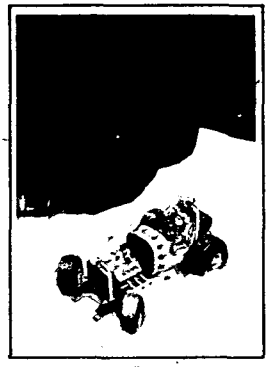

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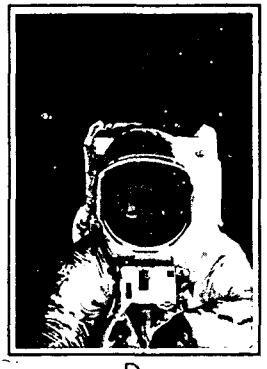

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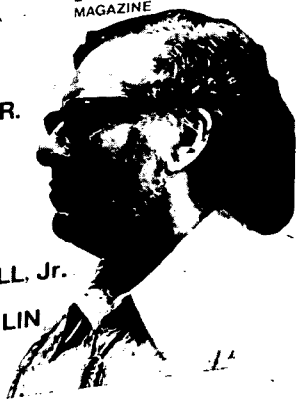

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